Table of Contents

1. Introductions
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9
12. Chapter 10
13. Chapter 11
14. Author's Message
15. Chapter 12
16. Chapter 13
17. URGENT ANNOUNCEMENT
18. Chapter 14
19. Chapter 15
20. Chapter 16
21. Chapter 17
22. Chapter 18
23. Chapter 19
24. Chapter 20
25. Chapter 20.5 (short!)
26. Chapter 21
27. Chapter 22
28. Chapter 23
29. Chapter 24
30. Chapter 25
31. Chapter 26
32. Chapter 27
33. Epilogue

Introductions

Allegiances

Shadeclan:

Leader: Hailstar- blue gray tom with electric blue eyes

Deputy: Silverclaw- handsome silver tabby tom with blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Violetfoot- blue gray she cat with a slightly darker shade of fur, soft blue-green eyes

Warriors:

Fernpelt- sandy brown she cat with black tipped tail (nursing two kits-Leafkit; Graykit)
Blacktail- muscular jet black tom with sleek pelt and amber eyes; senior warrior
Falconwing EDIT: Falconclaw* - broad-shouldered dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes and long, sleek tail
Featherpelt- light silver tabby she cat with blue eyes

Apprentices:

Birdpaw- light brown tabby she cat with green eyes

Fireclan

Leader: Sunstar- golden brown tabby tom with green eyes

Deputy: Sharpfang- dark ginger tom

Medicine Cat: Petalwing- pale gray she cat with gentle blue eyes

Warriors:
Dawnlight- small, lithe ginger she cat with white tipped tail (expecting Sharpfang's kits)
Spiderflight- skinny black tom, senior warrior
Bushfur- brown she cat with very thick fur
Eagleflight- black and white tom with green eyes

Elders:

Broken- ragged, battle-scarred brown tom with striped tail, blind (former name: Stripedtail)
Whitepelt- once-beautiful white she cat with brilliant blue eyes

Iceclan

Leader: Velvetstar- blue gray she cat with startling blue eyes

Deputy: Daisyfur- cream she cat

Medicine Cat: Cinderfoot- dark gray tom
    Apprentice: Hazelpaw

Warriors:

Nightpelt- black tom with green eyes, senior warrior
Brackentail- golden brown tabby tom
    Apprentice: Goldpaw
Clovernose- tortoiseshell she cat
Vinetail- brown tom with extra long tail

Apprentices:

Hazelpaw- brown she cat
Goldpaw- dark ginger she cat with green eyes

Cats outside Clans

Greenfur- mottled brown she cat with strange patch of fur stained green, formerly of Shadeclan, leader of the rogues
Clawface- brown tom with scarred muzzle, formerly of Shadeclan,

Greenfur’s “deputy”
Blaze- dark ginger tom
Poisontail- smoky gray tom with ice blue eyes, formerly of Iceclan
Night- black she cat with sharp blue eyes
Basil- pale gray tom with gruesome scar across belly
Hawk- golden brown tom with heavily set body and broad shoulders
Moss- small tortoiseshell she cat, Greenfur's sister

Prologue

***Editing in process.**

Prologue

A strangled wail of anguish echoed throughout the entire camp. Cats stumbled out of their dens wearily, and a few looked up from where they were sharing tongues and chatting with a fellow clanmate.

Willowleaf, a pretty tortoiseshell queen, was face to face with Shadeclan's medicine cat, Violetfoot. It was a big surprise since both were the clan's calmest, quietest members. Willowleaf's pelt was bristling, and Violetfoot's eyes blazed as they argued loudly, unaware of the attention that they were attracting.

"Why didn't you save him? You said he would heal in a few sunrises, but now you tell me he's dead!" Willowleaf seethed.

"Well it was whitecough, but I didn't know it would spread to greencough so quickly! I'm not Starclan, but I tried my best! Plus-" Violetfoot's sharp retort was cut off abruptly by the angry queen.

"Plus what? You're the medicine cat so it's your duty! We hunt and fight for you, so you heal our cats for us!" Willowleaf hissed, then cut off abruptly at the sight of a muscular gray tom approaching them.

"Wait just a moment. What is going on here?" Hailstar, the leader of Shadeclan, had overheard the argument and had padded over to listen. "Can some cat explain why you two are snapping at each other's throats this early in the morning?"

Violetfoot glared at her brother for a few heartbeats, before relaxing slightly and speaking with a hint of grief in her voice. "Amberkit just passed away from greencough last night. I originally reassured Willowleaf not to worry about his health, because whitecough

usually heals quickly. However, the infection seemed to be deeper than it seemed, and now that I think about it, Amberkit always did possess a frail body. His disease quickly developed into greencough. I gave him catmint and tansy, and he got slightly better, but last night he started coughing again. And today...well, you know the rest."

"And it's all your fault!" Willowleaf would have none of Violetfoot's explanation, and before any cat could stop her, raced out of camp, fur standing on end.

"Willowleaf! Where are you going?" her mate, Silverclaw, called after her as he looked up from sorting patrols, but when there was no response, attempted to run after her. However, Hailstar calmly strode over and blocked his way.

"No, Silverclaw. I believe that Willowleaf would appreciate some alone time right now. Meanwhile, why don't you come with us, and we'll tell you everything that happened?" he meowed.

The Shadeclan deputy's shoulders slumped in defeat, and he nodded. After casting one last, worried look in the direction that his mate had ran off in, he followed his leader into the medicine den, where Violetfoot was waiting to tell the morning's happenings again.

~~~~~~

Hailstar, Violetfoot, and Silverclaw appeared out of the medicine cat's den and looked around the camp. It was a good day of greenleaf where everything was peaceful. Everything was nice and warm. Well, almost everything. Willowleaf still wasn't back yet, and Silverclaw was getting worried.

"Hailstar, mind if I go and look for Willowleaf? She's still not back yet, and the dawn patrol should be here soon." Silverclaw meowed, worry on his face.

The blue gray leader cocked his head, as if lost in thought, then
~~~~~~

replied, “Okay, but be back soon. Shadeclan needs their deputy.”

“Thanks Hailstar.” and with that, Silverclaw turned for the entrance. However, just as he reached it, Blacktail rushed in, yowling “We’ve been attacked!!! Come quick!!!”

The clan uttered a gasp, and Silverclaw briskly mewed, “I’ll come with you. Show me the way!”

~*~

By the time they got to the edge of their territory and the beginnings of Twolegplace, they realized the battlefield was empty. Whatever had happened there was already over. Falconwing trotted up, his head was bowed in grief. “Greetings, Silverclaw...We’re sorry about what happened to...”

Silverclaw’s eyes widened. “Willowleaf? What about her?” Almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth that the answer dawned on him. “No. They couldn’t have. She can’t be...”

Falconwing didn't dare look up as he murmured, “Yes. She was slain.” His shoulders were slumped in defeat.

“Who killed her? I'll tear out their throats!” Silverclaw growled.

Blacktail placed his tail tip on his shoulder. “Come on. You can mourn when we get back to camp. This is not a good place to stay.”

Without another word, Blacktail padded over to a limp shape on the ground, seized its scruff, and started to drag it towards camp. He signaled to Falconwing, who bounded over and started to help. It

was a few moments before Silverclaw could snap out of his thoughts and recognize that the two warriors were carrying Willowleaf's body, and he also went over to assist them in carrying the corpse back to camp.

"Silverclaw! You're back! What happened? Did any cat get hurt?" Violetfoot was waiting outside the entrance of the camp. She gasped when she saw what the cats were dragging. "Is that...Willowleaf's body? What happened to her?"

Silverclaw shook his head, eyes glassed with sorrow, and laid his mate's corpse on the ground in the middle of the clearing. Warriors came over to look, and they too mourned. All of a sudden, Hailstar's voice broke the silence.

"Let all cats able to catch their own prey gather beneath the Fallen Log for a clan meeting!" he called. Violetfoot and Featherpelt padded over to sit at the front. Fernpelt stuck her head out of the nursery, and sat down at the entrance, gaze fixed on her leader. Silverclaw looked up from Willowleaf's body, and padded over to sit at the bottom of the log. Blacktail chose a spot a few fox-lengths away from the other warriors, and settled. When every cat was comfortable, Hailstar began. "As you all know, the dawn patrol consisting of Blacktail and Falconwing encountered some rogues this morning. Because they were badly outnumbered, Willowleaf, who happened to be there at the same time, was slain, and Falconwing got injuries on his flank. He is resting in the healer's den right now, but will heal in time. We have no elders as of now, so Silverclaw, will you be in charge of burying Willowleaf? She was your mate, so I thought maybe you'd like the honor."

The deputy dipped his head in respect. "Thank you Hailstar. I'll bury her at sundown, so the cats can have some time mourning

her."

"All right. That's settled. We have one more problem though. Willowleaf had a litter of kits a few moons ago, and although almost all her litter was wiped out, there is still one kit remaining. Who can mother this kit until she reaches apprenticehood?" There were a few murmurs among the crowd, and Fernpelt spoke up.

"Hailstar, I just had kits of my own. I can be a mother to Birdkit until she's six moons old. I'll take care of her just as good as if she was my own litter."

"Oh. That's good. I can count on you, Fernpelt. Everyone, you're dismissed to go to your duties. The meeting is over."

Just as the cats were about to get back to their duties, a small kit tumbled out of the nursery, clearly unaware of what happened that morning. Her light brown tabby fur was ruffled, but she didn't seem to care at all. Her sparkling green eyes shone, and in a small mew, said, "Hey! Where's Willowleaf? She wanted to play catch the moss ball with me! Do you know where she is? Have you seen Amberkit? I hope he's okay..." she bounded up to Silverclaw and began to bomb him with questions. "Father, have you seen mother? I was looking for her. Can you show me where she is? Oh! ...." When the little kit saw her father's eyes brimming up with sorrow, her words faltered, and suddenly shrank back a little. "Um, Father? Are you all right?" she mewed softly, eyes wide. When Silverclaw didnt answer, she went to Blacktail, surprising the black warrior, for he hardly knew the kit at all. "Um, have you seen my mother? I'm looking for her. She said she was going to play with me." When he too just stared at her with sad amber eyes, she got more worried, and a bit frustrated. She scrambled over to Falconwing, and pleaded, "Will you tell me where they hid my mother? I really want to play catch

the moss ball with her! Please!”

Before some cat could slap a tail over Falconwing’s jaws (They all knew he was the most honest and most blunt warrior in the whole clan), the answer was already out of his mouth. “Sorry Birdkit, but...your mother is dead. Look, she’s over there if you want to see her one last time.” He pointed with his tail towards the limp scrap of fur lying in the middle of the clearing. The little kit gave a small wail of distress, and scampered over to her mother’s dead body, throwing herself into her fur, while the rest of the clan watched on with grief.

Silverclaw padded over and rested his tail tip on her shoulder. “Come now, Birdkit, you should be heading back to the nursery now. Fernpelt will take care of you. We have to go bury your mother.”

“No! I want to stay with my mother!” Birdkit cried, shaking, as she pressed even closer to her mother's corpse.

Silverclaw gently sank his teeth into her scruff, and before she managed to squirm free, placed her on the ground right in front of him. “Birdkit, you had your time to grieve. Now it’s time to go back to the nursery. You can go play with Leafkit and Graykit, okay?”

She gave a little sigh, and slowly, dragging her paws on the ground as if each was like rock, Birdkit slunk towards the nursery, head and tail drooping. Fernpelt was at the entrance, waiting for her, and as Birdkit approached she licked the young kit on the ear and escorted her inside, disappearing into the den.

Silverclaw watched on silently, and whispered, “She has no family now except for me. I have to take care of her, just like a father should. I’ll watch over her for you, Willowleaf. I promise.”

~~~~~~

So...the end of the prologue! Please tell me what you think of it, and where I should improve on. Comments are appreciated. I'm also looking for a good name for the character Falconwing, but I can't find a good name for him. I can't delete him either, because I have A LOT planned for him! }:D PM me names you think are suitable for him. Thx!
~~~~~~

Chapter 1

***Partially edited**

"Birdkit, come forward please." Hailstar's confident meow rang out through the entire clearing. Birdkit, shaking free of Fernpelt's last licks, leapt forward excitedly and scrambled up the Fallen Log to sit, a tail-length away from the leader. She gingerly stepped forward, as though a bit nervous, but no cat could miss the barely suppressed anticipation that shone through her bright green gaze. She, Birdkit, was going to be an apprentice!

"From now on, you shall be known as Birdpaw, and your mentor will be Blacktail. Blacktail, you are a strong and noble warrior. Train Birdpaw to the best of your abilities." Blacktail, a muscular black tom, stepped forward, and Birdkit touched noses with him.

"Birdpaw! Birdpaw!" Fernpelt chanted, and the rest of the clan soon joined in with their yowls. As her gaze swept through the crowd, Birdpaw found Silverclaw watching her proudly, and the silver tom nodded approvingly. She suppressed a purr, for she was big, and soon will be the strongest warrior any cat has ever seen in the entire forest! Being much of a daydreamer, Birdpaw wanted to be leader someday too. She imagined herself, lean and strong, sitting up at the Fallen Log, calling her clan to a meeting, leading them into battle, being the most important cat in the entire clan.

As Birdpaw was still lost in her own world, a mew broke through her thoughts.

"Birdpaw! Congratulations on becoming an apprentice at last!" Fernpelt, her foster mother, had padded up to her, and was showering her with licks. She paused mid-lick to add, "I know you've been waiting for quite a while now." the sandy queen's eyes shone with pride.

"You're an apprentice now!" Leafkit had bounded up to her, and her eyes were wide. "I want to be one too! Can I, mother?"

Fernpelt purred at the small she-cat. "No, you're not six moons old yet, but when you are, I'll cheer the loudest for you and your brother, just like I did today with Birdpaw."

Graykit, Leafkit's brother, had been listening patiently, being more laid-back than his sister. However, he also seemed unable to control his excitement, and mewed, "Whoa...being an apprentice must be cool! I envy you so much, Birdki- I mean, Birdpaw!"

Without warning, he pounced on her, and Birdpaw tried to throw him off by batting at him with sheathed claws. Leafkit jumped on top of both of them, and all three rolled over in the dust in a mock fight. Finally, after a few manuvers, Birdpaw managed to pin each kit down with one paw on the ground, and let out a little mock snarl, "Surrender, you two Iceclan ruffians?"

"No! We'll never surrender!" Graykit squeaked, and Birdpaw growled again, cuffing him on the head with her paw. "Okay, okay! We surrender!" Leafkit whined, and her brother nodded in agreement.

Birdpaw let the two kits go. "Good. Now- OOF!" Before she finished her sentence, both kits had turned around and pounced on her as one. "You liars!" she managed to choke out before disappearing under a writhing mass of fur and paws.

"We'll never surrender!" Leafkit squealed.

Birdpaw was the one pinned now, and she tried wriggling out of their paws, only to be pinned down again. Birdpaw was just trying to think about how to overcome this situation when a purr interrupted their game.

"What's this? An apprentice, being beaten by two little kits?" Silverclaw had been watching the three of them wrestle together, and was now purring nonstop. With a small gasp, Birdpaw suddenly realized the whole clan must have been watching them play fight. She looked around, and saw that everyone looked amused; even Hailstar was trying to fight back a small mrrow of laughter.

Birdpaw's new mentor, Blacktail, padded over to sit by Silverclaw.

He licked one paw and drew it over an ear lazily before speaking.

"Looks like I have a lot to teach you now. Getting beaten by two kits, huh?" he teased with a flick of his tail.

Birdpaw's fur started to bristle. "Hey! I was only playing with them! Just watch me!" and she lunged at the warrior. Blacktail neatly sidestepped, and Birdpaw fell face flat onto the dirt, sending up a big dust cloud. She coughed a few times, then scrambled up, trying to appear dignified. Birdpaw shook her pelt lightly to clear all the dirt, and before any cat could realize, she spun around and shot forward, knocking her mentor over. She stood over him, one paw placed on his chest, and half growled in a deep voice, "See how strong I am now?"

"That was a nice move. Now let me get up so I can show you our territory. After all, if you kill me, who's going to teach you what it takes to be a warrior?" her mentor coughed, and she scrambled off him. He stood up, and padded towards the tunnel of brambles. "You coming?" he called over his shoulder.

"Yes!" Birdpaw took off after him.

~*~

Birdpaw was amazed at what she saw. They were in the forest now, in the dark, deep pines. It was a quiet, dim place, filled with all sorts of wonders just waiting for her to discover.

“Now, what can you smell?” Blacktail questioned, and motioned to her surroundings. Birdpaw opened her jaws to taste the air, and the scent of mouse flooded her jaws.

“Mouse! I can smell mouse!” she exclaimed, paws kneading the ground. “Can we go catch it?”

“Well, you just scared half the forest’s prey away....” he licked one paw and drew it over one ear thoughtfully.

A pang of guilt washed over her. *How could I have been so bee-brained!* "Sorry...I didn't mean to...." she muttered.

"That's okay. Just be more careful next time. What else can you scent?"

"Mmm...fox...but it's stale, from a few moons ago, I think."

Blacktail gave a nod. "Good answer. That's what I thought too. Now, let's go somewhere else. I'll show you the stream next." Then he bounded off, and she followed.

They arrived to the sound of the bubbling stream, hurrying along its way, and bright silver streaks flashes through at times. Birdpaw breathed in, and breathed out the clear, sweet scent of the water. Then she wrinkled her nose at a rotten stench. "What is that?" she asked. "It's so smelly!"

The black warrior sniffed the air, then let out a small mrrow of amusement. "That's the scent of our neighbors, Fireclan. They're another group of clan cats, similar to us, except they live different, and look much different. Fireclan cats are usually built very muscular and heavy, and they are very strong, unlike us. We are leaner cats that use speed to our advantage."

Birdpaw nodded. This was too much information for her to comprehend, but she pretended to understand anyways. She'd think this through when she went to sleep tonight. "Oh. I'd like to meet them someday."

"You will! The Gathering is tomorrow night. I'm sure Hailstar would let you go to meet some of the other clan cats." her mentor replied.

“Oh! Wow! I”ll be meeting other strange cats! I-” Birdpaw broke off as she got distracted by another streak of silver that speeded by. “Blacktail, what are these flashes of silver things that are in the river?”

Blacktail blinked once, then answered, “Those are fish. Fish are prey that swim in the water. Iceclan cats eat them. We usually don’t, because fish are stinky and not as good as a nice juicy vole.” He licked his lips as he said the word “vole”, and let out a small purr.

Another clan! How many were there? Oh well, she’ll meet them all once she gets to go to the Gathering. “What’s next?” she was practically bouncing on her paws to get to the next part.

“Come, and I’ll show you,” Blacktail meowed, and sprang away into the bushes. After some hard running, they arrived at a beautiful, lush meadow filled with green grass, warm sunshine, and patches of wildflowers. Birdpaw couldnt suppress her excitement, and before she knew it she was already bounding through the meadow, batting at butterflies that stopped to rest on her nose. She purred, and rolled over and over in the grass, finally stopping to rest on her back and stare at the sky and the setting sun. “The grass is so warm here!” she exclaimed.

“Yes. That’s why it’s called ‘warm grass’. The grass is soft and warm here, perfect for relaxing, and hunting.” Blacktail sank into a crouch, and silently stalked towards an unsuspecting field mouse nibbling on a bit of clover a few fox-lengths away. He pounced, and before the mouse could run, gave it a killing bite to the throat. It dangled from his jaws as he padded over to her. “See? The prey is very plump here, for there is plenty of food for them.” Birdpaw nodded in understanding as he continued, “Come on, it’s getting late. We should head back to camp now.” He flicked his ears in the direction they would run in, and set off at a brisk pace for the forest, Birdpaw following closely behind.

They arrived at camp some time later, out of breath and a bit

tired. Blacktail dropped his catch on the fresh kill pile, and chose a piece of prey to share with some others. Birdpaw suddenly felt a bit nervous, and shuffled her paws anxiously. She had no one to account her day to, since she was the only apprentice, and she had no friends in the clan save for Fernpelt's kits, who were probably fast asleep in the nursery. Just thinking of that aching loneliness made her want to whimper like a small kit.

A voice suddenly interrupted her thoughts. “Birdpaw. Why don’t you take some prey over to the nursery? Fernpelt and her kits must be hungry. You can eat after you deliver their meal.” Blacktail called over his shoulder from where he was crouching with Falconwing and Featherpelt. Birdpaw nodded briskly, and trotted over to the pile. There were two voles, and a plump squirrel sitting on top. A small thrush lay limp on the bottom of the pile. Birdpaw snatched up the squirrel between her jaws and bounded over to the nursery.

She squeezed through the entrance to where Fernpelt was suckling Leafkit and Graykit. She looked up wearily and nodded a thank you, and motioned for her to stay and share prey with her. Birdpaw accepted, and curled up next to her foster mother to eat. They ate in silence until the squirrel was gone, and Birdpaw felt safe and content. She felt Fernpelt’s tongue rasping over her ear, and felt a bit drowsy. They shared tongues, as mother and daughter, until Birdpaw stood up, shook herself, and mewed, “Thanks for the wash and the squirrel, Fernpelt. I didn’t know who I would eat with until you invited me. I should probably go now. Bye.” Fernpelt nodded, blinking sleepily as Birdpaw vanished through the brambles. She padded into the main den, where the warriors and apprentices slept, and curled up into her new nest of soft brackens, falling asleep in what felt like a few heartbeats.

~~~~~~

Chapter 1 is complete!!!! :DDDDD I still need to add some stuff to the next chapter before updating again though. Just so you guys know, I add one half of a chapter at a time, and combine it into one. The title says it all! Feedback is appreciated, and please do tell me what you think on it so far!
~~~~~~

Thanks for reading! ;D

Chapter 2

***Unedited**

“Birdpaw? Birdpaw, it's time for dawn patrol!” a mew rang in Birdpaw’s ears as she yawned, and blinked open her sleepy eyes. The den was still dark, filled with sleeping warriors. It was her mentor, Blacktail. His tail twitched impatiently, and she shook herself to get rid of the moss bits that clung to her fur.

Birdpaw stretched, and asked, “Dawn patrol? It’s not even dawn yet! The sky’s still dark!”

“Hailstar sent us on the dawn patrol. He said to patrol the borders along Iceclan, and we hunt along the way. Now hurry up before you wake the whole clan!” he snapped. She flinched at his harsh tone, and the warrior continued in a gentler voice, “Come on Birdpaw. You’re an apprentice now, not a kit in the nursery. This is your duty, to protect your clan from possible enemies.” Birdpaw nodded drowsily, and followed him outside the den. The air was crisp and cool, and there were traces of mist everywhere, making it harder to see. Blacktail had already padded away towards the camp entrance, and Birdpaw quickly bounded to him, following him through the fog and racing through the forest.

~*~

They had patrolled around warm-grass and the Iceclan border, and were stopping to hunt. Birdpaw had scented a strong smell of rabbit, and had noticed the fluffy creature some distance away, feeding on some grass. She instinctively dropped into the hunter’s crouch, and began to stalk silently towards the rabbit, paws skimming over the leaves like a slight breeze. The creature hadn’t noticed her until the very last moment, when she pounced on it. It tried to run away, but Birdpaw was too quick, and gave it the killing swipe. She snatched up the rabbit and headed back to her

mentor, head held high.

“Nice catch!” Blacktail meowed while sizing the rabbit up, “It’s going to feed at least half the clan!”

“Thanks,” Birdpaw squeaked, pleased with her mentor’s praise, “Should we bring it back to camp?”

“No, not yet. We still have some territory to patrol, so bury it and we’ll come back for it later.”

Birdpaw gave a small nod, and scraped some dirt over her kill. “Done,” she mewed. Blacktail nodded, and without another word he turned and ran towards the borders, her at his heels.

~*~

“Whoa! Is this where apprentices train their battle moves?” Birdpaw’s eyes were wide as she kneaded the ground with her paws in anticipation. They had finished patrolling and had just arrived at the Log Place, a clearing with a few fallen logs here and there that were provided to train with.

“Yes. This is where every apprentice trains with their mentors for their necessary skills in order to become a warrior. Today, we will practice some simple fighting.” he led her to a small area filled with soft dirt, backed away from her a bit, and spoke, If I were a fox that was about to eat you, what would you do?”, then spread his legs apart and bared his teeth, spitting. Birdpaw’s thoughts were whirling. She had to think fast, but she couldn’t just charge into him. There had to be some sort of plan that she could follow, but what? Birdpaw also knew she couldn’t look at the area where she was going to lunge, or he would anticipate her. Oh...I’ll think about it after I attack. She pushed all her thoughts away, and charged towards him. He braced her attack and shot forward to meet it, toppling her over and pinning her to the ground. A few heartbeats later he let go, and retreated to a sitting position, waiting for Birdpaw to get up. She staggered as she heaved herself up, and shook her pelt lightly to clear out all the dust.

“That was a wrong thing to do, especially if your enemy is bigger

than you. Instead, you should create a diversion, and trip them before you try and pounce on them. Now, let's try it again." He got into an attack stance, tail lashing side to side, bracing the attack. Birdpaw fluffed out her fur, and with a yowl, headed straight for her mentor at top speed. At the last minute she suddenly swerved sharply to the left, batted a paw at his legs to trip him, and spun around. She darted forward almost immediately before he could stand up and cannoned into him, sending him flying through the air, landing a few tail lengths away. She jumped on his back, and pinned him to the ground. "Give up?" she hissed, letting out a mock snarl.

"Never!" was the reply as Birdpaw was suddenly knocked off her feet. Before she knew it she was flipped over and pinned to the ground as her mentor stood over her, a paw on her chest. "That was a nice trick you pulled, but you have a long way to go before you can fight me." he meowed, a twinkle in his eyes. "Now, let me show you what you could have done to make that move better. You should have...." he went on as Birdpaw listened to him intently, and after Blacktail finished they got into position to try again.

~*~

The sun was shining brightly overhead when they returned, jaws full of prey. Blacktail was carrying a shrew and a mouse, and Birdpaw, eyes shining, proudly held her first prey, the plump rabbit. Silverclaw was on watch outside the thorn tunnel, and he broke into a rumbling purr when he saw Birdpaw's prey. "Well done!" he congratulated. Birdpaw felt a rush of warmth through her body as she received her father's praise. She caught her first prey today, and had made her father proud! The three then padded into the camp.

The camp was buzzing with excitement. Today is the gathering!! Birdpaw thought to herself. She really wanted to go, but since she was just an apprentice, she probably didn't have much chance. Going to the Gathering is a big honor....one she probably won't get to have until many moons later. Birdpaw sighed, and was startled when a loud growl from her stomach reminded her of what she should have been doing instead of moping over the Gathering. She needed to eat. That's right...but I can't eat a whole piece of prey by myself! It's too big! I-

“Hey Birdpaw!” a voice cut into her mind, scattering all her thoughts. She turned for the source of the voice, and spotted the cat who had called her name. A pretty silver tabby she-cat was crouched over by the main den, along with a muscular dark brown tabby tom. Birdpaw recognized the tom as the one who had bluntly told her about her mother’s death, showing no emotion at all. What was his name again? She asked herself. Oh. I remember. It was Falconwing. Her fur started to prickle up in annoyance at that thought of him being so blunt and neutral, but made her fur lie flat because the silver she-cat looked friendly. The she-cat waved her tail, as if gesturing for her to come over and share a mouse with them. Birdpaw padded over cautiously, and mewed a greeting. The tabby she-cat nodded, and meowed, “Would you like to share some prey with us?”

“Yes, please.” Birdpaw mewed, and her stomach growled again, loudly, in agreement. The she-cat let out a purr of amusement, and spoke, “It sure seems like your stomach is eager for some mouse! Come and settle down.” Birdpaw nodded, and crouched down to take a bite. Delicious, warm meat flooded her jaws as she chewed contentedly, along with her newly found friend.

They ate silently until all were content, and Birdpaw stretched luxuriously, swiping her tongue over her lips, savoring the last few scraps of flavor. “Thank you. Um, I haven’t gotten to know your name yet...what’s your name? You already know mine...” she trailed off, uncertain of what to say.

The silver she cat purred, and meowed, “I’m Featherpelt, and this is my brother, Falconwing.” she gestured with her tail at her brother, who nodded briskly, appearing bored. Birdpaw’s whiskers twitched angrily at his obvious indifference, but neither he or Featherpelt seemed to notice.

Birdpaw nodded at both, and asked politely, “Are you going to the Gathering?”

Featherpelt replied warmly, “We don’t know yet. Hailstar or Silverclaw will announce who gets to go and who stays. I think they will tell us soon. Any more questions?” Her eyes held a glimmer of obvious amusement at Birdpaw’s forced polite tone. Falconwing did

not look nearly as friendly as she did. In fact, he looked bored and slightly annoyed, much to her distaste. *What did I ever do to you that makes you so frustrated at me?* she thought angrily. Shaking that unpleasant thought off, she noticed that Featherpelt was still looking at her expectantly, as if wanting her to say something. Then a jolt of realization struck her, and she recalled what the silver she cat had said.

“Um....yes....What happens at a Gathering? Who comes to it? Who speaks at the Gathering? Do I get to meet new cats? Are they dangerous? Will they hurt me in any way? Is every cat going? Are apprentices allowed to go? Am I too young to go? Is-” she broke off abruptly as Featherpelt slapped her tail over her jaws.

“Hold up! Not too many questions at once, please. At the Gathering all the Clans share what has happened this past moon, and all three Clans are required to come. Only the leaders get to speak during the Gathering, but on occasion they allow for other cats to speak as well. Yes, before the leaders share, we all have some time to meet some new cats from other Clans. No, they are not dangerous. We are all under a truce, and no cat is allowed to fight with another. No, not every cat is going. Some elders, and the queens, and kits usually do not go. Some warriors also stay to guard the camp. Sometimes, apprentices like you, get into trouble and therefore are banned to going to the Gathering as well. Yes, you are allowed to go, but only if Hailstar thinks you are able enough to handle it.”

“Wow. Now I really want to go! Do you think Hailstar will pick me?” Birdpaw asked, a bit anxiously. She didn’t want to miss this first Gathering. Although she only became an apprentice a few dawns ago, she thought she was good enough to attend. *I can be very quiet and behaved if I want to,* she reassured herself. *Besides, when I was still a kit, Fernpelt always praised me for being the best one of the litter....* Birdpaw puffed out her chest self-consciously. Then she noticed that Featherpelt was cocking her head at her and Falconwing was staring at her like she just grew two heads. *Oops! Didn't mean to do that in front of them!* she thought. Birdpaw gave her chest fur a few brisk licks to hide her embarrassment, and to her relief, Featherpelt let out a mrrow of amusement and Falconwing just went back to looking bored.

"If you didn't get into any trouble, then why not? However, no cat knows why Hailstar chooses the cats he chooses. It all depends on how good you were today." Featherpelt replied thoughtfully, and drew a paw over her ear.

"Oh. Thanks. I think I should get going now. Blacktail told me to go change the bedding for the Nursery." Birdpaw politely excused herself. The silver tabby nodded, and went back to her wash. Birdpaw stood up and was going to head to the Nursery, when a strong, confident meow rang across the camp.

"Let all cats able to catch their own prey gather beneath the Fallen Log for a Clan meeting!" Birdpaw's heart leaped. *Was Hailstar going to announce who was going to the Gathering?* She felt so anxious that her paws felt like they were going to collapse underneath her. She gulped nervously, and stiffened as a cat tapped her shoulder. It was Featherpelt.

"Come on! Let's go sit up in front with the others," she mewed brightly. Birdpaw nodded, too sick to speak, and followed her friend to right beneath the Log, where some other cats were sitting. Birdpaw spotted Blacktail settling down a bit farther back, and Fernpelt bundling her kits over. She also saw her father, Silverclaw, sitting proudly at the bottom, chin raised up high and eyes shining. "I will now announce who will be going to the Gathering," Hailstar spoke, calmly and smoothly. Birdpaw felt her heart leap into her throat, and swallowed. *Oh, please pick me, please pick me, please pick me, I really want to go! Hailstar please pick me I reallly want to go!!!* She prayed. "The cats are-" Birdpaw uttered a small gasp, drawing annoyed glances from the cats around her. She muttered a quick apology, and they turned back to their leader, who slightly paused at the interruption. Birdpaw felt her fur prickle with shame. However, Hailstar did not seem to be bothered, and continued. "The cats are Silverclaw, Violetfoot, Falconwing, Featherpelt, and Birdpaw." Her heart soared. *He picked me!!!* Birdpaw was so excited, and her paws kneaded the ground in anticipation. "Now, if you haven't eaten yet, please do so now, as we will leave in a bit. Everyone is dismissed."

And with that, the blue-gray tom leapt off the log in a single bound and disappeared into his den. The cats stood up and continued to go

about their duties. Featherpelt and Blacktail headed off for a evening patrol, and Falconwing already left on a hunt. Her friend waved her tail in farewell, and Birdpaw waved hers in return. Then she turned around and headed towards the Nursery, heart filled with joy. *I'm going to my first Gathering tonight!*

~~~~~~

Chapter 2, check! :D Hope you enjoyed it. Comment and vote.....please?
~~~~~~

Chapter 3

***Unedited**

"Okay, Shadeclan, time to go!" Hailstar's meow echoed through the camp, and warriors rushed here and there to go rouse each other and get ready. Birdpaw stood from where she was sharing tongues with Fernpelt, and glanced at the patrol longingly, but didn't know how to excuse herself politely. She looked back at Fernpelt, whose eyes were warm, the sandy brown queen nodded encouragingly at Birdpaw, as if cheering her on.

"This is your first Gathering. I'm sure you'll have fun. Be careful!" Fernpelt licked Birdpaw's cheek. *Was that anxiety in her eyes? Is she worried about me getting into trouble?*

"Don't worry, I will. I'll tell you all about it when I come back, okay?" Birdpaw reassured her.

The she-cat purred, and replied, "I'm sure you will. Now, go on! Join them, and be sure to not cause harm!"

Birdpaw was already up on her feet and bounding away, calling back over her shoulder, "I won't!"

~*~

Birdpaw felt a little thrill of excitement rush throughout her body as she kept a steady pace with the rest of the patrol. Hailstar was at the head of the cats, and she could see a faint, ghostly outline of Silverclaw following behind him. Falconwing and Featherpelt were trotting side by side a little bit ahead, and Birdpaw felt a prickle of envy. She wanted company too. Why couldn't Starclan leave her a littermate? Then she'd have a cat to share all her adventures and secrets with. Birdpaw felt lonely, and the pain threatened to engulf her. She was drowning in a sea of loneliness, and Birdpaw really wanted to pull herself out. She-

"OOF! Watch where you're going!" Birdpaw had slammed against a cat, and the cat had whipped himself around to glare at her furiously. She looked up, right into the angry stare of Falconwing.

"Sorry," Birdpaw muttered. *Great. First feeling jealous, then bumping into the cat that hates me for no apparent reason.*

"Mouse brain..." he muttered under his breath. Then he turned around and began to whisper something into Featherpelt's ear. It must have been something funny, because she let out a mrrow of amusement and her whiskers were twitching with laughter. Birdpaw wished she could have fun with someone too.

"Halt!" came a command at the front. Birdpaw assumed it was Hailstar, and stopped abruptly, ears pricking. The rest of the patrol stopped too, and raised their heads toward their leader. Hailstar tasted the air with his jaws, and said, "Iceclan and Fireclan are both here. We are the last to arrive. Let us run!" They had reached the Gathering place, a small clearing with a big rock at the center. Craning her neck, Birdpaw could just make out two cat-like shapes perched on the rock. One was pacing back and forth, the other just sitting still.

Hailstar let out a yowl, and the patrol streamed down the slopes into the clearing where the other two clans stood. Hailstar bounded over to the rock, and leapt up, nodding to the other leaders as he went. Falconwing and Featherpelt padded in unison over to a small knot of warriors, where they were eagerly showing off some battle moves. Birdpaw was frozen in place, eyes wide. There were too many cats she didn't know! How was she going to meet them all? She felt a pelt brush hers, and saw her father blinking at her, eyes filled with encouragement. "Try some of the cats over there," he gestured with his tail, "They seem about your age, all young apprentices that are full of energy. I think some might be friendly if you're polite." Then he brushed past her and headed for the base of the rock, exchanging a greeting with the other deputies, and sat at the bottom of the rock.

Birdpaw hesitated for a brief moment, then gathered her courage, and cautiously approached the group of cats Silverclaw

had pointed out for her. *He was right,* she thought, *They look just like me, all excited and wondering what's going on. Maybe I should try to hold a conversation with one.* Birdpaw struggled to hide her nervousness as she approached a pretty she-cat with golden fur.

"Hi there, are you new to here too?" she asked politely.

The she-cat ignored her, and sat in silence as if Birdpaw had never asked. Birdpaw felt a twinge of anger, and tried to contain it when she asked again, "Hello. I was wondering if you're an apprentice too."

The she-cat yawned lazily. "So what if I am? It's none of your business." she replied cooly, and carried on with ignoring Birdpaw, who was getting more than a bit annoyed.

"Sure, it's not. I was just asking, unless you're too stupid to even look at me in the face properly." This time, Birdpaw allowed a thin edge to creep into her voice.

The golden she-cat turned, and studied Birdpaw closely, nodding. "You're a fiery one. I like you. By the way, I'm Goldpaw, so what's your name?"

"I'm Birdpaw."

"So, this is your first Gathering, right?" Goldpaw asked.

"Yeah, so I'm pretty nervous. Is this yours too?" Birdpaw had aquired some interest about this apprentice. She seemed nice, just in a different sort of way than normal cats.

"Yes," she admitted, but insisted, "but I've already made friends!. Do you want me to introduce you to some other cats I know?" She tilted her head, waiting for Birdpaw's reply.

"Okay! Sure."

Goldpaw stood, and squeezed into the group of apprentices, beckoning Birdpaw to follow. It was hard to follow the she-cat as she weaved through the throng of cats, but Birdpaw managed to keep up until Goldpaw came to a stop at the edge of the circle.

There, a small, lithe brown she-cat was sitting alone, gazing off into the distance as if she was deep in thought. Goldpaw flicked her tail casually on the brown she-cat's shoulder casually, before introducing Birdpaw.

"Hey Hazelpaw. This is a new cat that I've taken a liking to. Her name's Birdpaw," Goldpaw mewed, before turning to Birdpaw and explaining, "Hazelpaw here is my sister, and she's the medicine cat's apprentice." The brown she-cat called Hazelpaw got up daintily and sniffed Birdpaw.

"As my sister said, I'm Hazelpaw, the medicine's apprentice from Iceclan. Nice to meet you!" she mewed in a soft, lilting voice. *Hazelpaw seems nice. Way different from her sister, but not in a bad way,* Birdpaw thought.

"It's nice to meet you too! I've actually never met an Iceclan cat before, so-" Birdpaw's attempt at making conversation was cut off as Goldpaw sprang to her paws with a dramatic gasp.

"Sorry guys, but I have to go. See you later!" and disappeared into the crowd. Birdpaw stared blankly after her, confused. What did Goldpaw think she was doing? She repeated the question, aloud, to Hazelpaw, who simply let out an amused purr.

"Goldpaw's taken a fancy to one of the warriors from our clan. His name is Brackentail. He's young, apparently handsome, and quite nice too," Hazelpaw explained, "I think she's got a crush on him!" she sniggered under her breath. "Always talking about him, following him everywhere, the whole Clan is gossiping about those two! It's too bad Brackentail is oblivious to the whole thing, and doesn't even realize he's got a she-cat mooning after him."

"Wow. Sounds like he's very popular..." Birdpaw commented.

"Yeah, he is. Want me to introduce you to him?" Hazelpaw asked.

"Sure!" Birdpaw exclaimed, and kept pace with the healer apprentice as she wove between the crowd of cats. She stopped suddenly, and Birdpaw skidded to a stop, almost crashing into her.

"Hey Brackentail! I've come to introduce a new friend!" Hazelpaw introduced, and Birdpaw exchanged a light greeting with the young, lean warrior who studied her closely. Birdpaw noticed that Goldpaw was also there, sitting next to him and admiring him. Birdpaw had to fight back a purr of amusement.

"So you're Brackentail..." Birdpaw said slowly, "I've heard a *lot* about you...especially from a oomph!" as Goldpaw slammed a tail in her jaws. "Mrrph murff murr!!" Birdpaw spluttered wildly, as Hazelpaw looked on, very amused. Goldpaw took away her tail, and Birdpaw had to gasp for air.

"Shush!" Goldpaw hissed in her ear, "Do you want every cat to know who I admire?"

Birdpaw snorted with laughter. This was too funny. She opened her mouth to say something, but was quickly silenced by a tortoiseshell she-cat sitting a tail-length away. "Shush! The leaders are about to speak!" she scolded. Birdpaw quickly shut her mouth, and faced the Great Rock. She located Hailstar and the other two leaders, and studied them carefully. One was a broad-shouldered tom, who looked fierce yet fair and caring for his clan. The other was a lean-built she-cat with startling blue eyes that seemed to penetrate everything. The she-cat looked very sly and cunning, but definitely proud. She turned to Hazelpaw and whispered, "Which one of them is your leader?"

She whispered back, "The she-cat! Her name is Velvetstar. She's kind of scary, but it's very funny when she uses a sarcastic approach to tell off Goldpaw about neglecting her chores!"

"Oh. So the tom is Fireclan's leader, right?"

"Yup. His name is Sunstar. I wish I could be as big and tall as him someday, but it seems like that's impossible," Hazelpaw looked up at the tom admiringly. Goldpaw snickered at her sister's wild dream, earning her a cuff from the brown she-cat.

"Wow..." Birdpaw breathed, half-talking to herself. She wanted to be a leader someday too. Just like them up there, just like Hailstar. *I'll be the best leader Shadeclan's ever seen!* she thought.

"Attention clan cats!" Sunstar had stood, and his meow rang out loud and clear among the gathered cats, who immediately quieted down and gave attention. "I shall speak first." he then glanced at Hailstar and Velvetstar for approval, which Hailstar flicked his ears and Velvetstar said nothing. "Fireclan's doing well, the mice are rich and the meadows are lush, providing good food for prey and herbs for us. There hasn't been any other news lately." He stepped back, and Velvetstar strode forward to the front of the rock to speak next.

"Iceclan is doing fine, the river is rich with fish. There have been sightings of Twolegs, but they are not a problem. Also, we have named two new apprentices, Hazelpaw and Goldpaw."

She paused for a moment to let the cats cheer for the new apprentices. Goldpaw puffed her chest up proudly, and whispered to Birdpaw that she'll be the best apprentice ever. Hazelpaw looked down and seemed embarrassed, but murmured "thank you"s to the cats within earshot.

"That is all." Velvetstar turned around and retreated to the back of the rock gracefully.

"Hey, is it just me or does Velvetstar seem kind of terse in her speech?" Birdpaw asked Goldpaw.

Goldpaw nodded. "That's just how she is. Always business-like and getting to the point. She's kind to us, though, and I respect her a lot."

Birdpaw nodded in understanding, and turned her head back to the Hailstar stood.

"The prey is rich, the borders well-kept, Shadeclan is doing very well. We have also named a new apprentice, Birdpaw."

He also waited a moment for the cats to yowl out Birdpaw's name in congratulations. Birdpaw shuffled her paws nervously, unsure of how to react, but her eyes shone brightly with excitement.

"Unless some cat has anything to say, this Gathering is over." When no cat approached, he jumped down from the rock in a single bound and started to gather his clanmates. Velvetstar and Sunstar did the same. Birdpaw waved a farewell to her new friends and headed for her patrol. She was greeted by Featherpelt, who looked excited to see her.

"How was your first Gathering? Did you meet any new friends?" she inquired.

"Oh. It was great! I met two new friends from Iceclan. They're very nice." she meowed, thinking of Hazelpaw and Goldpaw. Then she started thinking of how Goldpaw was mooning after Brackentail, and fought back a snort of laughter. It was just too funny.

"Oh. Okay. That's great! Maybe next time you'll come and meet some warriors with me?" Featherpelt asked, "They're very nice." she added quickly.

"Sure. I'll come." Birdpaw agreed.

"Well....unless you get into...." her silver companion started, and Birdpaw asked agitatedly,

"What? What? Unless I what?"

Featherpelt purred. "Unless you get into trouble and is confined to camp for the next three moons!" she flicked Birdpaw's ear with her tail and raced off toward their clanmates.

"Hey! I'm not that troublesome!!!" Birdpaw protested as she sprinted off in pursuit. Today was the best day ever! She met new friends inside *and* outside of the clan. Birdpaw was happy, but her mood was dampened slightly when she spotted Falconwing staring at her. *Ugh. What did I do that makes him so annoyed at me?* Birdpaw thought. *Oh well. He's just an old stupid furball. Never mind him.* She averted his gaze and with her chin up high, she padded alongside Featherpelt on the way back to camp.

~~~~~~

Wow. This update took shorter than I expected. :) That's great! Hope I can post Chapter 4 up soon. I wish someone could comment. D:
~~~~~~

Chapter 4

***Unedited**

~~

This is dedicated to Veralidaine (hope I spelled it right!) and lumpinbanana because they gave me the encouragement to keep writing when no one had.

Wednesday was my bff's bday! Wish her happy bday okay?

Birdpaw stalked through the undergrowth, slinking through the ferns toward her target, an unsuspecting blackbird that was pulling out a worm a few badger-lengths away from where she was creeping up on it. Luckily, Birdpaw was downwind from her prey, so the blackbird didn't notice her. Birdpaw got closer and closer, and suddenly a rustling sound from the bracken nearby made the bird frightened. It flew, flapping and screeching into a tree and disappeared. "Mouse dung!" Birdpaw muttered. She had been so close.

"You could have caught that, you know," a voice sounded behind her, and Birdpaw whipped around to see the source it was coming from. *Falconwing,* she growled at him. *How dare he insult me for not catching that blackbird when he was the one who scared it away?*

"Yes, I could have caught it, but because you were so loud, strutting through the forest, you scared it away. " Birdpaw sniffed, and turned her back on him, tasting the air for more scents. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw that Falconwing's fur was bristling, and he let out a hiss of annoyance.

"I was *not* strutting though the forest. In fact, I think you're the only one in the forest who's so arrogant she won't even realize her own mistakes." the tabby tom mewed coolly, sitting down and beginning to wash himself in a lazy manner.

This angered Birdpaw. She wasn't arrogant, and she knew her mistakes. "If you're referring to the bird, then I do realize that I could have caught it. It's too bad that you're so stupid you don't even realize you're sitting on fox dung right now." she meowed in a tone that was just as cold.

Falconwing shifted uneasily, and stood up hastily to look at the ground under him. Noticing it was bare, his fur pricked up in annoyance. "You tricked me!"

"So I did." Birdpaw had to fight back a purr of amusement. Surely no cat would fall for this, wouldn't they?

Falconwing marched right up to her, shoving his muzzle in her face and said, "I don't like being humiliated, especially by the most annoying cat in the entire clan."

Birdpaw bared her teeth. "Me? The most annoying cat in the entire clan? You've got to be joking, because you're the one who keeps glaring at me whenever I do anything!"

The dark brown tabby snorted. "That's because you act so stuck-up and annoying." he let out a hiss of annoyance, which was quickly cut short as a little cough interrupted their heated argument.

"Well, well. What do we have here? The two most arrogant cats in the entire clan, arguing with each other like they're about to bite each other's heads off. I thought that would come sooner or later." Featherpelt had padded up to them, and was looking very amused.

"I'm not arrogant!" Birdpaw and Falconwing protested at the same time, then glared at each other. "She's-

"He's the

"the stupidest-

"Most annoying-

"cat in the whole clan!!" they ended in unison, glaring at each other.

"Well, we can settle that later," Featherpelt blinked warmly at each in turn, and mewed, "I came to tell you two that you are needed by the clan. " she turned to Birdpaw, "Blacktail wanted me to tell you that he wants to meet you at the camp, you're going to practice hunting." then she swung her head around to face her brother, "And you're going on a border patrol with me." The silver tabby she-cat stepped between the two, and gently nudged them away from each other. She gave Birdpaw a little prod with her tail, meowing, "Go on, Blacktail won't wait forever!" Then, she murmured something to Falconwing, who aimed a final glare at Birdpaw, then turned around and stalked off.

Birdpaw hissed, then whipped her head around and headed back to camp, head held high and not looking back.

Falconwing's POV: (yes yes very interesting XDXD)

Falconwing bounded through the forest, Featherpelt at his heels, enjoying the sound of leaves crinkling under his paws and the wind whistling past his ear. He loved Shadeclan's territory, and felt that he could belong no where else. *Today is the perfect day,* he thought. However, he let out a small hiss of annoyance as his mind drifted to Birdpaw, the mouse-brained, arrogant little apprentice who thought she was leader of the forest. *Why does she act this way? She's so thick-headed, I bet that if she crashed into a tree, it would have no effect.* He suppressed a purr of amusement at that. With that thought in mind, he closed his eyes, drinking in the scent of the deep pines and the lush green ferns.

They stopped, panting, at the base of an old oak to set their markers. As he padded back to his sister, he noticed that she was studying him, her blue eyes staring deeply at his. He cocked his head to one side, puzzled, and as if she understood his question, she answered, "It seems that you've been rather annoyed recently." When Falconwing made no comment, she continued. "It's Birdpaw, right?"

Falconwing scoffed. "She's such a mouse-brain! She thinks she's so great, when she can't even catch a blackbird!" She was the most annoying cat ever.

"Maybe she's a bit headstrong, but she's desperate to prove herself to the clan ever since Willowleaf perished from a rogue attack," the silver tabby mewed thoughtfully, which cast painful memories into his mind. Falconwing remembered his mother, who had also died when he and Featherpelt were just kits, leaving them alone with a father who had never loved them. He seemed oblivious to their presence. *At least Birdpaw's father pays attention to her,* Falconwing thought bitterly. After his mother, Skylark, had gone to Starclan, his sister was all he had. He was desperate to prove himself to the clan that he was worthy, that he had gotten over his grief for his mother, that he was a good kit to his father, to make them all proud. Maybe that was what Featherpelt meant, that he and Birdpaw were much the same? Maybe he had wronged her? *No. I refuse to admit that.* She was so much more arrogant than him. He was-

A battle cry had shaken him from his thoughts. He sprung to his paws, looking around wildly at the attacker, seeing Featherpelt doing the same. He whirled around, and saw a muscular tabby tomcat snarling and spitting at him. Falconwing spat at him, and growled, "What are you doing here?"

"To kill you," was his reply. Then the tom sprung onto Falconwing, jaws snapping at his throat. Falconwing heaved him off, and went back on his paws, ready for the next attack. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his sister fending off two she-cats fighting side by side, and yowled, "Quick! Go report to Hailstar and bring help!" She cast a worried glance at him, and said "No! I can't leave you alone here!"

"Hurry! Or they'll kill both of us! I'll be fine, go!" Falconwing dodged another swipe, and retaliated with a swipe of his own. He saw Featherpelt cast one last look at him, and sprint away into the forest. *Oh Starclan, make sure she's okay!* Falconwing thought as he tried to fend off the ring of cats clustered around him, in a tight circle, cutting off his escape. He sidestepped another attack, flung a tortoiseshell she-cat against a tree, then felt a dull thud at the base of his skull. Black washed over him in gentle waves as he fainted.

~~~~~~

Finished~ Yay! :D I dunno when chap 5 will be posted,
~~~~~~

probably soon. :) Thx for reading, and plz comment/vote/fan/add to library! ~cinna

Chapter 5

***Unedited**

~~

Thanks for commenting, Veralidaine! :) This is for you.

Birdpaw fell face-flat onto the dirt as she tried tackling a mouse but missed. She muttered under her breath, and scuffed her paws along the ground. This was her third time trying to catch a mouse, and the third time she failed. She glared at the ground in frustration, fur pricking up along her spine.

"Your crouch was good, but you need to make your paws lighter and softer, as if they are gliding across the ground," her mentor, Blacktail padded up to meow. He crouched, and stalked forward silent as a shadow. Birdpaw gazed at it, trying to imagine how to make herself do the same.

Blacktail straightened up and shook his muzzle. "Now you try it," and sat down a bit further away, next to a pine tree. Last time Birdpaw tried to stalk, she focused so hard on the ground she pounced on him in mistake. Her mentor clearly didn't want that to happen again. Birdpaw sighed, and shifted into the position. She creeped along for a few badger-lengths, and then stood up, glancing at her mentor for comments.

He nodded thoughtfully, and remarked, "I think that was great. Shadeclan cats are all built fairly light and agile, able to stalk silently in the woods. You're very light, but your paws are a bit clumsy, so I think you need to work on that a bit more." Then he motioned how to step lightly, and how to avoid certain obstacles.

Birdpaw nodded, and was about to practice it again when she saw another plump mouse, nibbling on a beech nut some tail-lengths away. She glanced at her mentor for approval, and he gave a brisk nod. Birdpaw dropped down to her crouch and began to

glide forward as if she was the wind. *One paw after another...now this one...getting closer...NOW!* and when she was less than a fox-length away, she pounced on the mouse. It looked up, frightened, and tried to make a dash, but Birdpaw snagged its tail in her claws and sank her teeth into its throat. She made a catch!

"Well done!" Blacktail praised as he padded over to admire the fat mouse. "I think this will feed quite a few cats," he commented. As Birdpaw scraped earth over her kill, she suddenly heard a yowl of pain and snarls coming from the borders. She saw that her mentor had heard too, because his ears were pricked up and his eyes alert. She listened further, craning her neck, and thought she recognized the voice somewhere.

Birdpaw looked to Blacktail for advice, and he flicked his tail, motioning for her to follow him, and the two bounded off, in search of the strange yowls.

~*~

Birdpaw skidded to a stop at the edge of the slope with wide eyes. Falconwing was wrestling with a tight knot of cats all at once at the bottom, and he clearly was losing by sheer number. She was about to dive into the battle but was blocked by Blacktail. She looked at him, puzzled, and he hissed into her ear, "If both of us go now, there will be no cat to drag Falconwing back to camp, and we'll all be doomed. I'll go, and you stay here. If you think it's safe, get down there as fast as you can and drag Falconwing to some sort of safety. Then, you can join the fight, because Featherpelt was with him, so she must have gone back to camp for help." Before Birdpaw could protest, he had already streaked down the hill and had pounced on a tortoiseshell she-cat, clawing at her furiously. *There's no choice but to do what Blacktail told me to do,* she thought.

Birdpaw studied the battle scene. There were four cats still in the clearing, including Falconwing. The dark brown tabby was slumped at the edge, fainted, while Blacktail was grappling with the two other cats somewhere on the other side. She saw her chance, and began to creep down. Birdpaw got closer and closer, and suddenly she was knocked over by another cat, hissing and snarling at her. It was a bright ginger tom with piercing green eyes. He

hissed at her some more, but never motioned to attack. She gazed at him, confused yet cautious.

The stranger whispered at her, "Take your clanmate and go. If you don't go now, the rest of the gang will kill him. Now go!" and he shoved her hard. Birdpaw came back to her senses and seized Falconwing by the scruff, slowly dragging him up the hill.

~*~

Birdpaw was splayed out by a bush, Falconwing still asleep by her side, exhausted. She decided to wait for her mentor here, because there was no way she could drag a full grown warrior back to camp all by herself. As she waited, thoughts on the battle sprang into her mind. *They didn't look like clan cats,* she thought. The ginger tom had said something about a "gang", whatever that was. Speaking of him, who was he? *Why did he help her?*

~*~

Falconwing's POV

Falconwing woke up, groggy, and realized he was back at camp as his eyes refocused. He was staring at the ceiling of the medicine den, he guessed the shuffling noises was Violetfoot who was sorting herbs. *Hmm...* he thought. *Some cat must have carried me back to camp when I was unconscious.* He tried to sit up, but his legs collapsed under him.

"Hey! Don't try to sit up yet!" a crisp mew greeted him. Violetfoot had padded over to sit by his nest with a few leaves in her mouth. She set them down, and scolded, "What in Starclan did you think you were doing, taking down a whole patrol of rogues at once?" When Falconwing just laid there, sheepishly, not answering, she snorted, and muttered under her breath something that sounded like "young cats these days...thinking they're so great....".

"Well, it's already happened! There's nothing anyone can do about it now..." Falconwing protested, feeling slightly ashamed. "I already feel very guilty."

"Good. Now, eat these herbs." she instructed, voice slightly warmer. He obeyed, licking up the foul tasting leaves. *Violetfoot knows best,* he said in his head. *After all, she's the medicine cat, isn't she?*

Just then, the most annoying cat in the clan had padded in, a mouse in her jaws. She marched over and set it down, then opened her mouth to speak. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

"For what?" Falconwing looked at the mouse, then her, then realized. "Oh. The mouse. Well, thanks." then he bent down to eat. It was nice and plump, and tasted very good. The meat was warm in his mouth, and he chewed with relish.

Birdpaw waited a few moments, then prompted. "Well? The mouse, you're welcome. But what else?" she flicked her tail irritibly, then sighed. "I saved your life."

"What?"

"I. Saved. Your. Life." she enounciated clearly and slowly. It took a bit to sink in.

"So you were the one that dragged me from the battle to camp?"

"No, but I did drag you to safety, and helped you back to camp with Featherpelt."

"Oh. ....so?"

Birdpaw rolled her eyes. "So? So aren't you going to thank me?"

Falconwing suppressed a slight purr. "No! It's what every clanmate ought to have done to each other."

Her pelt started to bristle. "Well, I wouldn't have. I thought maybe you could be less arrogant and at least express gratitude to your life saver. Too bad you're so stupidly proud not a single cat could persuade you to let it down!" She whipped around and stalked out of the medicine den, fur sticking up on end. Falconwing stared after her, confused. He was only joking!

"It's okay. She's always been a feisty and stubbornly proud one. She'll calm down sooner or later," Violetfoot called from where she was sorting out her herbs. She shook her head in exasperation, and returned to her work. Falconwing nodded, and concentrated on finishing his mouse.

~~~~~~

HaHa!!! I finally got to update. :D I'm sorry for keeping you so long, just that school's been kinda busy and I don't have time to get on Wattpad. Sorry! Next update...I'm not sure. So...stay tuned, and meanwhile, Comment, Fan, Vote! Thanks for readin my little story! ~cinna
~~~~~~

Chapter 6

***Unedited**

~~

Enjoy. (:

Birdpaw stalked out of the medicine den, feeling angry and hurt. How dare him not thank her for saving his own pelt? Surely he was not that stupid, was he? *Well, that's not even the worst of it. I've got work to do.* She scoffed, and padded over to the moss ball she had collected that day, for cleaning out the smelly nursery. Birdpaw glared at Leafkit and Graykit who were tussling with each other nearby, and glared even more at Blacktail who had assigned her to do this. She spotted him, watching from a corner, amber eyes glittering with an emotion she could not tell. Was it amusement? Maybe. She huffed, and started rolling the new moss over to the den, and squeezed in, ignoring the nod of thanks from Fernpelt.

Birdpaw started crumpling the old bedding together, and cursed when it just made everything worse. She started to pile small balls of it, then combining them to make a bigger ball. Luckily, it did not take too long, and pretty soon she was faced with a mountain of stinky, dirty bedding. Birdpaw groaned at the thought of having to roll it all over camp, but grimaced and pushed it out of the den anyways.

After that was disposed, she headed back to the nursery, and put all the new moss into nests. Satisfied with her work, she backed out of the now new and fresh-smelling den and headed over to the fresh-kill pile, feeling a bit hungry. Just as she was about to pick out a plump pidgeon from the pile, a paw snatched it out of the way. It was her mentor, gazing at her sternly, holding her prey. "No. Not after you've hunted," he ordered.

"Why? I've already went on border patrol, and cleaned out the

nursery!" she complained.

"A good warrior eats after he has hunted. You need to learn the clan comes before you, and that you must contribute to the clan before you take."

"But what about Fernpelt and the kits?" she protested.

"Fernpelt is a good warrior, and she has done much to the clan by raising these two healthy, strong kits. As for Graykit and Leafkit, the fact they are growing to be sturdy and strong is good enough contribution, for without kits we have no clan. Now, stop protesting and get to hunting! Ask some cat to come with you, since I cannot."

"Why can't you?"

He grimaced. "As much as I'd like to show you some battle moves today,"

Birdpaw gasped. She loved learning new battle moves. They were so fun!

"....I cannot because I've been assigned to double patrols, then a meeting with Hailstar. I've got plenty to do, and I need to go. Get a warrior to come with you."

Birdpaw sulked, but nodded. She sighed, then turned away from the fresh-kill pile, only to bump into some cat.

"Oops! Oh! Birdpaw! You look kind of down today. What's the matter?" it was Featherpelt. The silver tabby was looking at her in a concerned manner.

Birdpaw wanted to pour out everything that has happened to her awful day, but knew that maybe she could later. Right now she had work to do. Plus, she was hungry and wanted to eat as fast as possible. Also...Blacktail was watching her. "Nothing. Um, do you want to come hunting with me? Blacktail couldn't and I needed a warrior to come with me."

"Oh. Sure! Should we go now?" she asked.

"Yeah. So I can get to eat a bit earlier when we come back," Birdpaw mumbled. She got to her paws and started padding to the camp entrance. Featherpelt followed, with an expression that suspiciously looked like stifled amusement. Birdpaw sighed again, then straightened up from her slouch and raced outside of camp, calling, "Let's see who can catch something first! Bet you that I win!"

"Oh yeah? Warriors don't lose to mere apprentices!" was the reply, followed by a small purr. Even Birdpaw brightened a little at that, and challenged, "Well, I'll be the first one to beat you!". This was going to be her first contest, and she was going to win, no matter how good Featherpelt was.

~*~

Birdpaw slowly crept up on an unsuspecting mouse, nibbling on a nut some paces away. Her belly brushed the ground, and her paws glided over the dirt and leaves like mere air. *Just a little closer.....* she thought. *A little more....almost there.....* but then a crackle somewhere in the forest set the mouse upright. It squeaked in alarm, dropped the nut, and fled. At that moment Birdpaw jumped up and pounced, but only managed to snag a bit of the creature's fur. "Mouse dung!" she hissed. "Now I'll lose the contest, and Featherpelt will never let me hear the end of it!"

Huffing, she got to her paws and started sniffing the air for more prey. *Hmm...stale fox scent...maybe a moon ago...the mouse that just fled....a cat.....* "A cat?!" she bolted upright, ears pricked. This wasn't Shadeclan scent. ...but it didn't quite smell like Iceclan cats...who reeked of fish, and it didn't quite smell of sunshine like the Fireclan cats either. Should she go back to camp and warn Hailstar? Nah. She decided against it. By then it might be too late anyways. Birdpaw sniffed again, and pressed her nose to the ground, trying with some difficulty to follow the trail.

Her nose led her around an oak tree, through some ferns, under some bushes....until she came face to face with a clump of ferns that smelled strongly of that scent. Birdpaw unsheathed her claws. This was definitely an intruder. And she was going to chase this cat away.

With a yowl, she crashed into the ferns, raking her claws furiously down the spine of the enemy cat. The cat screeched in pain, and whirled around, snarling, and pinned her to the ground with lightning fast speed. Birdpaw gasped. She was going to die now. Birdpaw closed her eyes, bracing herself for the killing bite.

But it never came. Instead, the cat released her, and retreated a few steps back, no longer growling. Birdpaw sprang up and faced the cat. It was the ginger tom from before! He helped her rescue Falconwing! But before she could utter a single word, he spoke, green eyes flashing.

"You."

~~~~~~

:D Finally uploaded! Sorry that I didn't find time to update...hehheh.... but that doesn't matter! (does it? lol)

Hope you enjoyed this little section. Comment/Vote/Fan/Add to reading list! Thanks for reading. I really do appreciate it that you've stayed with me so far.

~cinna <3
~~~~~~

Chapter 7

***Unedited**

~~

Hello there! :D Left you guys on a cliff hanger last time, eh? :P Well...I hope this part explains it. Enjoy!

"You."

"Yeah. Me. And what are you doing on Shadeclan's territory?" Birdpaw blurted out, pelt bristling. Just because he did her a small favor didn't mean he could go wherever he wants.

"Aren't you going to be grateful?" he relaxed his stance a bit, and sat down, tail curled neatly around his now sheathed claws.

She hissed at him angrily. "Grateful about what? I could have managed on my own, thanks."

His eyes glinted with amusement, much to her irritation. "You're a feisty one, aren't you?"

Birdpaw was getting very irritated. Who did he think he was? *Stupid toms...they think they're so great.* she thought. "Well? Answer me! What are you doing on our territory? Just because you saved my life once doesn't mean I won't rip you to shreds now!"

"Peace!" was his response. "Calm down. I'll tell you all about it, later." he added hastily as she glared at him.

"Fine. How about now?" she demanded. Who was this cat anyways?

"I said later." his gaze suddenly turned cold, which sent shivers down Birdpaw's spine. But he soon recovered, and meowed with a warmer tone, "But let's make an introduction. I'm Blaze. What's your name?"

Blaze....he didn't have a warrior name. Then he must be some loner or rogue...Birdpaw figured. Tell him her name? She wasn't so sure about that...but what harm could it possibly have? "Birdpaw." she mewed.

"Birdpaw..." he repeated. "It's a good name."

"Thanks."

Suddenly, his nose twitched. He bolted upright, then meowed hurriedly, "I have to go now. Meet me here at half moon."

"What? ...Okay.." she agreed recluctantly. Then Blaze whipped around and disappeared into the undergrowth. She stared after where he'd gone, dazed. Why did she agree to meet him again? Then, she shook her head lightly, in an attempt to clear her jumbled thoughts. She had a hunting contest to win! Birdpaw got to her paws, and scented the air for more prey.

~*~

"Hey Birdpaw! What did you catch?" came a mew. Birdpaw was just scraping earth over the pidgeon she just caught, and jumped slightly when she heard the voice. She raised her head warily, then relaxed when she saw it was Featherpelt, trotting towards her with a rabbit and two mice in her jaws. "It wasn't very good hunting today," she admitted, dropping her catch on the ground. "I missed some, but this will feed plenty." her eyes shone with pride at her catch.

"Great!" Birdpaw congratulated her, purring. "I have a pidgeon, and a shrew back there. I didn't catch much either." but she knew that was only half true. She did miss some prey, but a chunk of her time was also spent confronting Blaze, the strange ginger tom she met.

Featherpelt sighed. "It's still greenleaf, but prey's been scarcer than usual." she commented.

Birdpaw nodded, picking up the pidgeon in her jaws. "Come on. Let's go collect the rest of my catch." Featherpelt flicked her tail, and followed Birdpaw as she padded towards where her catch lay.

~*~

It was night, and half moon rose slowly, casting its shadow and light onto Shadeclan's camp, giving it a dim sheen of silver. Birdpaw twisted and turned in her nest, unable to decide whether to follow through with her words or not. Yes...she did agree to meet Blaze...but she still wasn't certain if she should go. Plus, what would happen if she got caught? Blacktail would skin her....Birdpaw sighed. She didn't want to get in trouble and clean the Nursery for a whole moon as punishment, but she didn't want to break her word. She was also curious about what Blaze had to say to her. What harm could it do?

Birdpaw crept silently through camp, trying not to let her shadow fall across the dens filled with sleeping cats. She jumped a little when something cracked, only to find that she'd stepped on a twig. Sighing in relief, she hurried out of camp and slunk through the forest, anxious to get to their meeting place.

~*~

Birdpaw skidded to a stop as she arrived, panting, at their spot. Finding that no cat was there, she looked around nervously. Just then, she felt pawsteps come up behind her, and a deep meow rang in her ear, "Hello. Glad to see that you've come."

"Um, hi..." Birdpaw stammered, whipping around to face him.

Blaze blinked warmly at her, saying nothing.

Birdpaw stared, unsure of what to do. "What do you need me for?"

"Let's just say, I thought you were interesting." He sat down, and continued, "I think you're special. Different from all the rest."

Now she was confused. "Huh? I'm just an apprentice...how am I special?"

Blaze studied her. "You're very modest, aren't you?" When she made no reply, he sighed. "Oh well. You'll find out later. But Bird, you're much more important than you think."

"My name's Birdpaw!" she corrected him, but he waved his tail in dismissal.

"You'll understand it all later. As for now, let's meet here, every half moon?" he inquired, getting up and taking a step towards her.

Birdpaw retreated nervously, and as he stepped closer, she felt his breath, hot against her ear. "Come on. Let's be friends!" Then, without any warning, he aimed a cuff at her head, which she dodged easily. She sprung on him, and the two wrestled for a bit, until Blaze had pinned Birdpaw down.

"I win. Now, are you going to argue?" Blaze announced triumphantly, gazing down at her.

Birdpaw sighed. "Okay okay! Just let me get up!"

He did, and when she got to her paws, he flicked his ears in farewell, and started padding away. She was about to call after him for leaving her so suddenly, when he swiveled his head back and reminded, "Don't forget half-moon!" and disappeared into the bushes.

She stared after him, speechless. She still didn't know this cat very well, but he was right. They could be friends. Who knows? Maybe he'll even join Shadeclan one day.

~~~~~~

I WAS gonna write more, but I thought the last sentence finalized this chapter. Sorry that it's super short, hehe. XD Winter break's coming up, so I hope I can update more often.

...please PM me names for Falconwing? I really need to change it. }:O The name bugs me, since it doesn't suit him at all. I like the prefix "falcon", but the suffix isn't right.
Maybe...Falconstrike? Sigh. Oh well...I guess the next chapter depends on you PMing me. See ya! ;) ~cinna
~~~~~~

Chapter 8

***Unedited**

~~

Sigh. -_- i have a ton to do right now. this chapter will be SUPER short, and I'm really sorry. Maybe I'll update once winter break starts....

It's been two moons since the first meeting with Blaze. Birdpaw followed through with their meetings, and as each half moon went by, they got closer and closer. He was her best friend outside the clan. In the clan, she had no one. Silverclaw was the deputy, so he had other responsibilities to take care of. Birdpaw understood that. She also knew that since the clan was short on warriors, every cat had double the duties, so Featherpelt and her couldn't talk often either. Blacktail insisted on training her until dusk every day, and she was very tired from all the work. Also, she could only see Goldpaw and Hazelpaw at Gatherings, and Goldpaw was mooning after Brackentail most of the time. Birdpaw sighed. She wished that all her friends wouldn't be so distant. That she could have more company. That her father and Featherpelt would talk with her more often. Birdpaw knew she was being selfish...but loneliness was just too much! The only cat she ever saw frequently was Falconwing, and that's only because he had patrols with her.

"Why can't my friends be in my patrols, or hunt with me instead of Falconwing?" Birdpaw complained to herself as she stood up from where she was eating. Originally, Featherpelt was going to share tongues with her, but she had an extra border patrol to go to, so that was cancelled. She jumped a bit when another cat approached her, and focused her eyes in to see who it was.

Oh. Him. Birdpaw resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She and Falconwing bickered over everything, from whose prey was the biggest to whose tail was longer. He usually won, much to her

annoyance. However, she did like the way that throwing her anger out at him relieved some of her moods and stress.

"Hey," he meowed.

"Hi." she nodded her head curtly.

He sighed. "Look. I've got something to say to you."

Birdpaw could guess what he wanted to tell her. She felt the same way too...as much as she didn't want to admit it. "Yeah?"

"Uhh....umm..." he stammered, unsure of what to say now. Obviously he was surprised at her listening to him.

Birdpaw cocked her head, blinking. "Go on," she coaxed.

"Fine. Umm..."

"Wait."

"What?" he asked.

She took a deep breath, then admitted, "I've got something to tell you too."

"You go first," he flicked his tail.

"Well...." she cast a glance at the ground. "How about we say it together?"

"Sure....I guess."

"Okay. One....two...three!" she counted off.

"Look. Let's just be friends, okay? Our bickering is pointless." he blurted out.

Birdpaw nodded slowly. "Yeah. Sure."

Falconwing took a small step back, amber eyes wide. "Really?"

"Yeah." was her reply. "I've always thought that the two of us

arguing over whose tail was longer was kind of ridiculous."

He purred in amusement, and she soon joined him, both thinking back at their stupid, pointless, hilarious disagreements. Then, as their voices faded, each lapsed into their own thoughts, silent.

Falconwing broke the silence first. "Hey. Remember when I said that your eyes were too small, and that it was strange that you could even see out of them?" he inquired, a strange gleam in his eyes.

"...Yes?" Birdpaw responded cautiously, squinting. What was he thinking up now?

"I think it's true." Then, his whiskers twitched, trying to stifle a mrrow of laughter.

She aimed a cuff at his head, but her eyes shown no sign of anger. Maybe she underestimated him....because here she was, play-fighting and teasing the very cat she wanted to strangle before right now. But he was right. They were clanmates, and clanmates shouldn't be snarling at each others' throats all day long. *Friends would be a better outcome*, she decided.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

As I said. XD This was shorter than I planned. Hope you liked it...hehe. Drama's gonna come along soon ;)

Oh well. Don't worry about my irregular updates, because I love this story and world too much to abandon it. Stay with me here~! I'm glad you've supported me so far. <3 ya all! ~cinna
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Chapter 9

***Unedited**

~~

Hey~ I'm in the middle of a tough decison...and a major writer's block...so this chapter's gonna be a filler, okay? ;)

"Okay Birdpaw," Blacktail nodded, padding away.

"I have to leave for a patrol, so our training will pause for today. Meet me at sunset for a dusk patrol though!" he called back over his shoulder so she could hear.

Birdpaw nodded wearily, and stumbled her way out of the training area. Placing one sore paw over another, she struggled to not trip as she made her way back to camp.

~*~

After what felt like moons later, she finally emerged through the entrance, yawning. Birdpaw had been up before dawn for a border patrol, and right after she had gone hunting with her mentor, and after that they'd been practicing battle moves ever since. "And I thought yesterday was tiring!" she exclaimed to herself, padding over to the fresh-kill pile to get something to eat.

"Hey! Birdpaw!" a voice called.

She turned her head slowly towards the cat, who revealed herself to be Featherpelt, with Falconwing sprawled out by her side. "Yeah?" she asked.

She flicked her ears at a half-eaten mouse laying at her paws. "Want to share with us? We can share tongues too!"

"Okay." Birdpaw dragged herself over, and felt extremely relieved as she crouched down with her two friends to eat. Biting into the flesh

of the mouse, she took a big mouthful, crunching the bones with her teeth with delight. This was her first meal of the day, as she had been too busy to eat before.

"Jeez. You look like a half-starved fox!" Falconwing commented as he aimed a paw playfully at her head, rolling onto his back with leisure.

"Well, I've been busy training with Blacktail," she responded, still too focused on devouring the prey to look at him.

Featherpelt purred. "He pushes you pretty hard, doesn't he?"

She scoffed. "Yeah, maybe too hard. What mentor would have their apprentice kill themselves hunting, patrolling, training and doing chores all day?"

"I'm not sure..." Falconwing meowed sarcastically. "How about...a good mentor?"

Curious, she looked up at him to explain.

Catching her eye, he stared at her and said, "Well, do you want a mentor who teaches you useful stuff or would you rather him or her feed you plump mice all day and you don't learn anything except of how to be a kittypet?"

She chose the first.

He nodded, and carried on, "Yeah. That's what Blacktail's doing. He wants you to learn as much as possible before you become a warrior so you can be of some service to the clan and not be some plump, lazy cat who eats all day." The last part sounded funny, but there was no amusement in his gaze.

"I...I guess...." Birdpaw stuttered, unsure of what to say now. She resolved not to complain about anything Blacktail would force her to do anymore, now that she understood the meaning of being an apprentice and serving her clan. She looked at her paws, feeling guilty for being such a kit.

"...don't be ashamed." Featherpelt cut in gently. "These are harsh

times, even for greenleaf."

Birdpaw stared at her. "I thought greenleaf was the best season!"

Falconwing snorted. "Yeah, it is. Except those rogues keep stealing our prey, and the clans have been on dangerous terms recently."

"Mhm." Featherpelt nodded. "They all blame each other for the prey-stealing, and I think we're the only clan even aware of the rogues."

"Wow..." That took a while to sink into Birdpaw's mind. "Dangerous times...isn't it?"

"No," Falconwing broke in smugly. "It's just me."

That pun took her and Featherpelt a bit to get it, but once they did, Birdpaw cuffed him on the head and Featherpelt purred with amusement. They went on, exchanging jokes and had fun that afternoon.

~*~

Dusk came soon enough, as Falconwing and Birdpaw stood to bid Featherpelt a quick goodbye because of the patrol.

"See you!" called Birdpaw as she headed out of camp with Blacktail and Falconwing, who said nothing but flicked his tail in farewell.

Featherpelt nodded, and soon Birdpaw could only see a small, silver figure crouched in the shadowy thorn tunnel, guarding the camp and watching for intruders.

~*~

When they came back from the patrol, Featherpelt had been replaced with Silverclaw, who nodded briefly at them when they passed by. As Birdpaw brushed past her father, he whispered into her ear, "Glad that you're back."

She blinked at him in thanks, then turned around and followed her mentor and Falconwing into camp.

Blacktail had immediately headed towards the warriors den, throwing back a reminder to meet him at dawn the next day as he went. Birdpaw nodded after him, and watched as his slim, shadowy figure disappeared into the den. Falconwing followed after him, with a flick of his tail as farewell. Birdpaw veered left to enter the apprentices den, but froze as she heard whispers coming from Violetfoot's medicine den. Struck by a stroke of sudden curiosity, Birdpaw crept close and pressed her muzzle to the wall of the den to listen.

"I know it's true! Starclan said so!" a fierce, hushed mew sounded. It appeared to be Violetfoot, but Birdpaw had rarely seen the quiet, calm medicine cat be so agitated.

A deeper meow shushed her thoughts, and she strained even further to listen as another cat spoke. "Well, what if they pretended to be Starclan? How do you know that this is a prophecy?"

Birdpaw guessed the second cat was Hailstar, because every other cat was either asleep or guarding the entrance to the camp, but that was Silverclaw.

"Well, I know it is! She told me!" was Violetfoot's protest.

There was a brief moment of silence. "Who?" Hailstar asked, a hint of anxiety entering his voice.

Violetfoot never answered, but a gasp of realization from the leader showed that he understood. "What did she say?" his mew rose in a pitch.

"Well...." Violetfoot lowered her voice. "She said..."

Another moment of silence.

Birdpaw strained even harder, the thorns now jabbing mercilessly into her muzzle and cheek. Biting back a mew of pain, she listened as Violetfoot recited,

"An old enemy shall come to rise,

To quench fire, light dark, and melt the ice.

Storm is forest's only hope

And one choice shall remain alone.

Is that it? Birdpaw thought. Then she was answered as Hailstar coaxed her on, gently but firmly.

The medicine cat took a deep breath.

"At a perilous time, a bird shall fly,

And save the forest, but pay a dear price.

To struggle against a dying breath,

And face a challenge that's worse than death."

With that, the den lapsed silent again, until Hailstar commented, "Well, this doesn't look like any good news."

Violetfoot must have nodded, as he said, "Let's sleep on it, and see if you get any more dreams from Starclan. Maybe it'll clarify as time goes...but I have a horrible suspicion about this."

A scuffling noise told Birdpaw that the leader was backing out of the den, and she whipped around, dashing madly for where she was supposed to be: Sleeping.

Just as she had made it across the clearing, she heard him mew, "Birdpaw?"

She stiffened, turning around slowly. "Yes, Hailstar?"

"What are you doing up so late?" there was concern, edged with suspicion in his voice.

"Oh. I...had to go to the dirtplace," she lied. He nodded, relieved, and she mentally let out a sigh of relief also, that he had believed her.

"Well, you should be going to sleep now," he instructed, "Blacktail won't be pleased if you don't show up at the proper time tomorrow."

"Yes, Hailstar." she dipped her head in respect, and backed into the apprentices den.

As Birdpaw lay down into her soft nest, her eyes closed, but her thoughts were whirling madly. Who was the "She" Hailstar and Violetfoot had talked about? What did the prophecy mean? Who was the enemy? The rogues? And...a horrible suspicion nearly choked her. Was she the "Bird" mentioned in the second half of the prophecy?

She would have to ask Blaze about all this.

~~~~~~

Okay. My computer is broken, and we have a ton of viruses. So....I'm not sure when I'll update again. Finished the chapter today....FINALLY THE DRAMA IS STARTING TO UNRAVEL!!! *CHEERS*

So...what did you think of the prophecy?

...I'm not going to ask for you all to comment/vote/fan anymore. It obviously doesn't work, and no one ever pays attention to what I say. -_- So I'll say it ONE LAST TIME.

If you DON'T like this story, STOP READING HERE, OKAY? And if you like this story, you can SHOW that you like it. What am I supposed to think if there's a ton of reads but no comments? My story's awesome? It sucks? So tell me! Voice your opinions!

....end of rant. -_- I'm sorry towards all of you who HAVE commented, told me what they think.

~cinna
~~~~~~

Chapter 10

***Unedited**

~~

Hey~ My computer's fixed....for a while already. >.< But I had these big exams and projects to do, so I'm sorry for not uploading. Well...here it is!!

Blaze nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting...." was his only murmured response. Birdpaw crouched beside him, anxious to hear his insight.

He blinked, then meowed, "I think you should start paying attention to your dreams."

Birdpaw was confused. "What? Dreams?" she echoed, puzzled.

"Yes, dreams. As far as I know of this Starclan, they send dreams to important cats." Blaze nodded, and continued, "And if you're really involved with this so-called prophecy, then they should be sending dreams and signs to you, and guide you along."

She blinked in response, and nodded.

"Anything else that's news?" he inquired.

In a fraction of a heartbeat, Birdpaw thought she saw an odd glint in his eye, something in his green gaze that almost made her flinch. But she blinked again, and that look was gone, replaced only by mere curiosity.

"Well....there's not much besides that..." she mewed, a bit anxious. His sudden interest in all this surprised her, and she was impatient to start doing some other fun things.

He nodded curtly, and fell silent.

"Erm...do you want to race me?" Birdpaw ventured in a small voice, wishing to break the stony moment between them.

He stood up, shaking his pelt, still silent. Birdpaw was confused, but that soon disappeared as he suddenly took off into the forest, throwing back a "I'm going to win!" as he flashed past.

"Hey! No fair!" was her complaint as she sprinted after him.

~*~

"Hey Birdpaw! Are you coming to the Gathering tonight?" Falconwing's warm greeting jolted Birdpaw from her uneasy thoughts. Her friend fell into step by her side as the padded across camp to fetch something to eat. Today had been a relatively easy day, as Blacktail was in the leader's den, conversing with Silverclaw, Hailstar, and Violetfoot. When he was occupied, she hunted, and took a long, leisure walk along the borders, enjoying the quiet sounds of the forest. She was busy thinking about the prophecy, and all the ominous meanings possible.

"Oh. Umm...I don't know..." Birdpaw confessed. "But I want to!"

He purred, and replied, "Every cat loves the Gatherings. Hailstar would only leave you behind if you've done something bad. ...have you?"

Birdpaw's eyes widened. Did she do something bad? Was Blacktail in his den because he was telling Hailstar on something she did wrong? Maybe it was the battle move...she just couldn't aim the paw right. "Oh! Uhh...I'm not sure. But...do you know what Hailstar, Silverclaw, Violetfoot, and Blacktail are talking about in his den?" she asked.

"No...why?" he blinked at her, amber eyes searching.

"Nothing," she muttered. "It's nothing." Then, she hurried off, pelt bristling, leaving him staring after her, amber gaze scorching in her back in confusion and puzzlement.

Featherpelt came up to her and nodded a warm hello. She nodded back, and her silver-pelted friend asked, "What's the matter?"

"Oh....well...." Birdpaw stuttered. She didn't know whether to confide in her or not.

Just then, Falconwing came up behind her, and laid the tip of his tail on her shoulder, and meowed softly, "Hey, it's okay. We're your friends. You can count on us to help you."

She sighed, and poured out the entire story about how she was practicing battle moves, but couldn't get one right. She told them how she just couldn't flash out a paw and trip her foe like Blacktail had instructed her to. She also told them about how she had gotten impatient and had refused to practice anymore, and how Blacktail sentenced her to clean out the Nursery for two moons.

By the end of her story, both her friends had odd looks in their faces. "What?" she demanded, annoyed.

"Uhh...Birdpaw...." Featherpelt started awkwardly, and her whiskers twitched. Falconwing coughed, and both looked at each other.

"Oh Birdpaw!" Featherpelt exclaimed, purring. "We thought it was some sort of trouble you did!" Falconwing nodded, letting out a mrrow of laughter as he did so.

"...this isn't trouble?" Birdpaw stammered.

"Of course it is," Falconwing explained, "but the whole clan knows already. Hailstar was already informed. Plus, every apprentice gets his or her paws into trouble every now and then. It's nothing unusual."

"...the whole clan knows?!" Birdpaw exclaimed. She didn't know that news would travel so fast.

Featherpelt purred. "Well, we all see you trudging around camp with a tangled ball of old bedding, and heading into the Nursery with a scrunched up muzzle, so we all figured."

Birdpaw let that sink in. "Oh...so it wasn't that thing that made Hailstar get so tense?" she breathed out a sign of relief.

"No! Definitely not." Falconwing confirmed, but then lowered his

gaze. "Although...I am rather curious to know what they were discussing about that was so important the conversation would last most of a day."

Birdpaw nodded. "It must be super important."

"Yes...." Featherpelt agreed, "but let's not stand around the entire afternoon. Let's go get something to eat, and then we can share tongues until Hailstar announces who gets to go to the Gathering!" and with that, she turned around and padded towards the fresh-kill pile.

Falconwing followed, and Birdpaw trailed after them, still in thought. *Okay. Maybe it wasn't the battle moves predicament...could it have something...* Then, with a jolt of horror, she realized, *What if they're talking about the prophecy?*

~*~

"Okay. The cats who will go to the Gathering tonight are Silverclaw, Blacktail, Falconwing, Birdpaw, and myself. If your name was called, please meet me at the entrance of our camp to head off to the Gathering. Dismissed." Hailstar sprang down from the Fallen Log, and waved his tail to the cats who were leaving for the Gathering.

Birdpaw stood, and made her way past the cats for the camp entrance. Still lost in thought, she almost stumbled on a pebble until Falconwing used his shoulder to steady her.

"Hey, you okay?" he fell into step beside her, amber eyes gazing concernedly at Birdpaw.

"Oh. I'm fine." she tried to brush it all off, and walked briskly ahead to avoid further questions. Starting a random conversation with Blacktail, she was aware of Falconwing's scorching stare as she tried to get away from him.

It wasn't that he was her enemy or anything. No, it wasn't that. She just didn't want to give him a chance to interrogate her about her recent behavior. Birdpaw sighed inwardly. She wasn't going to let

any cat find out about anything...no she wasn't. She didn't even know what the prophecy meant. She didn't know if she was supposed to meet a rogue and be friends with him. She didn't know whether she was supposed to tell her friends. Lost in her whirling thoughts, Birdpaw continued her way to the Gathering with her clanmates, avoiding her friend and former rival.

~*~

"Hey Birdpaw!" a warm, cheery mew greeted her. It was Goldpaw, with Hazelpaw following a little ways behind her. Her two friends squeezed past a few cats and stopped before her, purring and sniffing her.

Birdpaw broke into a purr at the sight of them. "Hi Goldpaw, hi Hazelpaw. How's life?"

Goldpaw's eyes widened. "Oh! Life's great! Plenty of news too!"

Hazelpaw stared at her sister as she bumbled on excitedly, "We think Clovernose is going to expect kits..."

Goldpaw ducked as a paw swatted her. "Hey! What'd you do that for?" she squeaked indignantly.

Hazelpaw cast her a concerned glance. "Well...you haven't heard certain that Clovernose is going to expect kits. Who'd you hear it from anyways?' she demanded.

"Well, Brackentail told me a few sunrises ago! You say he's not telling the truth?" Goldpaw shot back.

Birdpaw gazed at the two sisters, and cut in, "Hold on. So...a she-cat named Clovernose in your clan is expecting kits?"

"Yes!" Goldpaw interrupted. "I heard she was going to expect Vinetail's kits!"

Hazelpaw sighed. "Don't mind her. She loves to gossip, and since she's been crushing on Brackentail for a while, she'd believe anything he says." there was amusement in her mew.

Now it was Goldpaw's turn to aim a cuff at her sister.

Birdpaw let out a mrrow of laughter as she watched the two sisters wrestle each other back and forth, but her head snapped up as she saw a flicker of movement from where the leaders were perched.

"Attention all clan cats!" a meow rang out from the rock. Birdpaw craned her neck to see who it was that addressed all of them. It appeared to be Sunstar, the leader of Fireclan.

His distinguishable golden tabby pelt flashed under the moonlight as he stepped forward to speak. "All is well in Fireclan. We have good prey, and no enemies have come to bother us." However, there was an edge to his mew, and many must have noticed, for their pelts were slightly bristling, and there were murmurs among the crowd.

Velvetstar stepped forward. "Iceclan has no major news to report. We have enough fish to go by, and we have chased off the few badgers from our territory."

She dipped her head and retreated back into the shadows, and Hailstar emerged from his corner of the rock. "Shadeclan is well. There is nothing unusual." Hailstar's poise was dignified and calm, yet his eyes seemed to reveal hidden worry.

There were more murmurs among the crowd of cats.

"Please stay put for a moment longer. Velvetstar, Sunstar and I have something to discuss among the three of us. We will be back soon and inform you." Hailstar meowed to the three clans.

This time there was an uproar.

"Why can't you discuss it right now, right here?" a yowl echoed somewhere to the right of Birdpaw.

There were yowls of approval, but Sunstar bounded to the front of the rock, his teeth bared in a snarl. "Fireclan. Do as I say." His eyes blazed, but his voice remained as cold and indifferent as ever.

There were a few more grumbles, but otherwise the cats were

silent.

Velvetstar nodded, and beckoned for the other two leaders to follow her as she lead them into a small huddle. Nothing could be heard, for they were obviously trying to keep it a secret. It seemed to be agitating, for Hailstar's fur was standing on end, and there were low growls from Sunstar.

After a brief moment, the three leaders departed from their tight knot. Sunstar gestured for Hailstar to go forward and speak, which Velvetstar acknowledged with a small nod.

The Shadeclan leader stood, regal and poised, at the top of the rock, looking down upon every cat. There was tension in the air, and every cat seemed to be giving their fullest attention to him.

"Greetings, Fireclan, Iceclan, Shadeclan cats. As your leaders," Hailstar flicked his tail at the other two leaders, "we always decide the best for you. However, currently, there are disagreements between our three clans for matters that we each deny on the act of. There is no concrete proof, nor solid witnesses to prove any side as innocent or guilty. Shadeclan did not steal from any other clans," there was steel in his tone as he directed his gaze towards Velvetstar, "and I shall assume that no other clan has stolen from Shadeclan."

"Yeah, well who would want to eat Shadeclan prey anyways?" an anonymous challenge sounded.

Hailstar flinched, yet ignored it and moved on. "But that is contradictory. Each clan has reported of missing prey. And if we have not stolen from each other, then who is it to blame?"

This time, no one answered his question.

"No answer?" Sunstar bounded forward, claws scraping against the stone. "No answer is fine, because we have one for you."

Velvetstar nodded, blue eyes sweeping over the cats like chips of ice, and spoke,

"We blame the rogues."

~~~~~~

Gotta speed it up now. o.O This drama is unravelling too slow. -_- must...write...more...

anyways. Hope you enjoyed this! :) ~cinna
~~~~~~

Chapter 11

***Unedited**

"Just a clarification. To make my uploads seem a bit less confusing, I've decided to change up my formatting a bit.

If a chapter is marked "COMPLETE", then it is...obviously a complete chapter.

If a chapter is marked "ONGOING", (like this one) then I've only posted a half of this chapter, and you should check back in a few weeks to see if I've uploaded again, marking it "COMPLETE".

Thanks for understanding :D and here's your half of the chapter."

EDIT: ^^^^that stuff up there? Yeah...no. Today I'm removing all that junk. This story is going to be updated like any other story. ~4/9/14

The crowd shifted uneasily, and tension came down in thick waves, engulfing each cat in their own anxiety. Birdpaw scuffed her paws in the dirt, and she felt Goldpaw beside her, fur bristling. Hazelpaw simply stared up at Hailstar.

"Each of us three leaders have received a different yet similar sign from Starclan." Hailstar's meow jolted everyone back to attention. "Sunstar has met with with the ancient leaders-"

There were gasps.

"-leaders," Hailstar continued, "and they have given him warnings of what is to come. Velvetstar has received a vision of the future, and I have dreamt of a prophecy."

Now the clearning buzzed with the voices of many cats, each sharing their own opinions and fears with their clanmates and friends.

"Silence!" Velvetstar barked. Everyone fell silent as she stepped forward to speak. Hailstar dipped his head in consent as he backed away.

"Based on Sunstar's meeting with Firestar, Icestar, and Shadestar, we have interpreted their wills to the best of our ability. We believe that they want us to send a patrol of cats to find the rogues, and gain their trust so we can find out about their plans for us and the forest." the Iceclan leader's brittle mew shocked everyone.

"But we need warriors here!" a protest echoed through the crowd. Murmurs of agreement followed.

Velvetstar turned her ice-blue gaze on the area of where that yowl came from. They shrank away visibly, obviously intimidated.

"Well, as I said. I've received a vision. If we do not act now, we will be driven out of our territories. The clans must live, no matter what! I will gladly pay all of my lives for it, I believe your leaders will too." she glanced at Hailstar and Sunstar, neck fur bristling.

Birdpaw winced. That was a challenge to Shadeclan and Fireclan's honor. She hoped that Hailstar would announce for them to stay and fight.

It seemed that other cats thought the same, for there was a chant rumbling, "Stay and fight! We will fight!"

Sunstar growled deep in his throat. "Fireclan will fight to the death it means keeping our forest from those fox-hearted traitors!"

"Yes, Shadeclan will also stay and fight." was Hailstar's agreement.

"Good." Velvetstar's fur began to lie flat. Birdpaw wondered if she was afraid that the other clans would give up and leave Iceclan to defend itself alone. "We will meet here at half-moon, with the cats that we choose to uphold this quest. Each clan may take two to three cats, and the patrol will choose a leader, preferably a senior warrior, to guide them all and lead the way to the rogues' camp. This will be a perilous journey for us, so we must choose healthy, strong, brave cats who are willing to sacrifice their lives for our

clans."

Her words were met with voices of agreement, and challenge towards the rogues. Birdpaw cheered for Shadeclan, and Goldpaw rose to raise a yowl of approval. Hazelpaw followed her sister's lead, and stood on her hind legs.

Hailstar broke in, "Okay. Now that we got this all settled, it is getting late. We will decide our representatives, and will send them here on half-moon under a truce. Then, they shall report back to their leaders for the other cats who are going, and depart the following dawn. Are we agreed?"

A chorus of "Yes"es answered his call.

Sunstar nodded, and meowed, "Then let us be off now. May Starclan light our paths!" and sprang down the rock in a single bound, shouldering his way past the crowd to his clan. Velvetstar leapt down neatly, and flicked her tail for her clan to follow. Finally came Hailstar, who scrambled his way down, and called to Shadeclan.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye..." Hazelpaw murmured.

"Yes...unless we get picked to come on the journey, of course!" Goldpaw's mew was cheery with anticipation.

Birdpaw nodded. "Even though we're still apprentices...we might have a chance." Secretly she hoped to go as well. Maybe she'd even see Blaze there!

As her friends departed, Birdpaw turned to follow her clanmates into Shadeclan territory. "Don't you wish that we could go?" Falconwing whispered to her as they trotted side by side behind Hailstar.

"Of course!" Birdpaw responded, barely disguising the excitement in her mew. She really hoped to be chosen by Hailstar to go on the journey!

~*~

"Birdpaw!" Falconwing called from across the camp.

Her head snapped up. "Yes?" she answered, bounding over.

"Oh. Blacktail said that he wanted me to come get you, because we have a meeting in Hailstar's den." her friend explained, sounding a bit flustered. "Sorry if I interrupted you doing something important."

Birdpaw shook her head. "Oh, it's okay. I wasn't doing anything productive anyways. So, should we go?" she pointed her chin towards the general direction.

Falconwing waved his tail, and followed her as they padded side by side into the leader's den.

Birdpaw gasped when she saw the inside of the den. It was fairly large, with natural shade from the lichen covering the entrance. Near a corner was a big, comfy nest filled with moss and feathers. Hailstar sat in another corner, faces almost hidden among the shadows. Birdpaw thought she caught her leader's stinging blue gaze as it raked over her, studying her movements.

"Sit, please." Hailstar's meow was polite yet comfortable. Birdpaw and Falconwing did as he asked, and sat down, tail tucked over their front paws.

Hailstar drew in a breath. "I do not wish to tarry on this meeting for too long. Therefore, I will make my decisions bluntly. Is that all right?" he was asking a question, but Birdpaw had the uneasy feeling that it was rhetorical.

With a slight incline of Falconwing's head, the stormy gray leader continued. "Very well. As you have heard from the Gathering, two to three cats shall be chosen from each clan to go on the quest to spy on the rogues. I am here today to give you two the honor of being chosen from your clan as representatives."

Falconwing's eyes slightly widened. Blacktail showed no response. Birdpaw shifted her paws uneasily. She wasn't so sure about it being an honor.

"But...Hailstar." Falconclaw interrupted hesistantly.

"Yes?" his blue eyes narrowed, as if not expecting to be interrupted, and there was a flicker of some emotion that Birdpaw couldn't put her paw on. Curiosity? Surprise? Admiration?

Falconclaw cleared his throat nervously. "Why pick us? Birdpaw's an apprentice, and I'm still a young warrior. Why not choose Blacktail to go instead?"

Hailstar was silent for a few heartbeats. "Blacktail is much too valuable to the clan to spare. Especially since leaf-fall is coming, we cannot afford to lose him. As for Birdpaw...I have my own reasons."

"You will meet with the other representatives at half-moon. There, you will decide on a basic traveling plan, and report back to your clans, where you will set off the next dawn. I am not so sure about where you are supposed to start, but Sunstar has alleged that there has been many trails of rogues in their territory, and if you follow scent trails it should be fine."

Birdpaw fought back a grimace. Of course it was fine. Hailstar wasn't the one who might die trying to follow the trails.

The Shadeclan leader's crisp blue gaze swept over both of them, studying them closely. "Do you choose to accept this responsibility?" he asked.

"Yes, Hailstar." was Falconwing's determined meow.

"Yes." Birdpaw mewed.

"Good. You may leave to discuss strategies on your own time now." Hailstar stood, and Birdpaw stood with him. Obviously they were being dismissed. Nudging Falconwing a bit, she beckoned for him to get up, and exited the den.

Falconwing glanced at her, a sparkle in his amber gaze. "So, Birdpaw. Are you ready for this?" he seemed excited by this. Birdpaw was scared of dying, but she admitted that the thought of it sounded like an amazing journey.

Purring, she replied, "You bet!"

~~~
~~~

Author's Message

Hey there, readers. I just posted this to tell you guys that I'm gonna have this story on hold. I may pause it for a few weeks, a month or two.

Reason is- I simply cannot go into the drama without thinking up a name for an important character. I don't want to go back and change names for 30-40 something future chapters. So, I'm gonna pause it here. Once I think up a good name, or if just at least 3 people voice their opinions on Falconwing's new name, I can continue the story.

Please note, I don't like putting this on hold any more than you do. I'm sorry that I have to do this, but it would definitely make the plot and my life a lot easier if I thought everything through now. However, I WILL NOT. Delete this story. This is my work, and I will make sure to continue it to the end. Whether its for anyone who cares about it, or just plainly for my own entertainment. Either way, ATF is staying.

Thank you all for understanding my decision. I really do hope some people can speak up and pitch in their 2 cents on this issue. It would mean a lot to me as the writer. Thanks again~ cinna

Chapter 12

***Unedited**

~~

Hey y'all~ :) I'm back!! Thanks for all of you who commented and showed your support for this story. I was really touched because of how many people shared their thoughts, and just....thank you so very much. I'm really grateful to every one of you. Okay, enough sappy things now. xD Without further ado, here's the chapter!

Oh~ one more thing. I'm extremely pleased to announce that the new name will be Falconclaw :) It seemed to be relatively popular among all of you.

Tonight was half-moon, the night where Birdpaw and Falconclaw were supposed to travel to the Gathering place in order to meet the other clan representatives. Birdpaw took a deep breath. It was almost time to go. She felt a rush of excitement ripple through her pelt, and couldn't resist letting out a small squeak of anticipation. Maybe she'd even see her friends! She was so busy wrapped up in her own thoughts that she tripped over her own paws and somehow collapsed in a heap right in front of another set of paws.

"Sorry!" she mewed hastily, scrambling to her paws. Looking up, she saw that it was Silverclaw, who was gazing down at her with a slight spark of amusement in his eyes.

"Hello Birdpaw," he broke into a purr. "I just thought to come over and say congratulations for being selected to go on the journey." as her green eyes met his ice blue gaze, he narrowed his eyes slightly. "However, I come with warnings also. You are still very young, and is relatively inexperienced compared to many of the warriors both in this clan and in others. When you go to meet the other two clans' representatives tonight, you must be careful not to show disrespect

to them. Some cats are very hostile, and it may be hard to gain their trust. I think you'll need every bit of your wits in order to not raise up a fight between you and some other cat."

Birdpaw opened her mouth to object, but he flicked his tail to silence her. "Also," he continued, "Be careful not to attach yourself to any specific cat from any of the other two clans. I understand that you have friends from Iceclan, but you must realize that in the end we are still all rivals, and you are absolutely forbidden to walk too close to any one of them."

"But why?" she burst out. He stared at her in surprise. "Why must we all be rivals? Why can't we just all live together in peace and make all the friends we want? Starclan wouldn't want us to fight all time over territory, right?" she blurted all her questions out.

"No." his voice suddenly turned steely. Birdpaw flinched visibly, and took a step back in surprise. Seeing that she was unnerved, he softened his voice a bit. "No, because that's how the warrior code was created. We all are required to follow it for the rest of our lives, and pass it on to each new generation to come. These rules are meant to stay forever, and there is nothing else that can be said about it."

Birdpaw nodded slowly, comprehending all the information her father gave her. A shift in movement caused her to look up again, and she saw that her father had turned away.

"Farewell, Birdpaw. May Starclan light your path, and we all hope that you can come back safely." he called over his shoulder as he padded away.

Birdpaw said nothing. Staggering to her feet, she shook her head, trying to clear all her thoughts. As she did so, she was aware of another pelt brushing hers.

"Hey there. Blacktail wanted me to ask you if you've eaten yet, because we need to go soon." It was Falconclaw, who was blinking down at her.

"Umm...yes. I already ate." Birdpaw replied.

He nodded. "Okay. In that case, we should probably be off now. We can't be late for the impatient Fireclan cats and the prickly Iceclan brats!" there was a hint of humor in his voice.

Not replying, Birdpaw simply turned and padded towards the camp entrance. Seeing that he followed after her, she exited camp and started heading for the Gathering place.

Falconclaw brought up the rear, being careful to not fall behind.

As the two of them raced through the dense forest, Birdpaw felt a surge of happiness rush through her. Even though she knew that this mission would be dangerous and cats may die in the process, Birdpaw still anticipated its coming.

~*~

As Birdpaw burst into the clearing, she saw that there were already three silhouettes shadowed against the moon. The soft light cast a light on them that made them appear slightly ghostly, with their pelts all shining silver no matter what the original color was. Heads swiveled around to look at the three newcomers, and Birdpaw thanked Starclan that none of the gazes seemed to be hostile, only mild curiosity.

As Birdpaw and Falconclaw padded over to the group of cats, one figure stood and padded over to greet them.

"Greetings, Falconclaw, Birdpaw. I am Nightpelt of Iceclan. This is my companion, Hazelpaw. She's the medicine cat apprentice, and Velvetstar believed that she may be of use to us if any cat gets injured." Nightpelt was a lanky black tom with green eyes. He turned to glance at a smaller brown pelt huddled beside him, and it shifted, revealing Hazelpaw.

She said nothing, but dipped her head respectfully to Falconclaw. Hazelpaw raised her head to gaze at Birdpaw though, eyes sparkling in excitement and happiness at the sight of her friend.

The third cat also stood and padded over to them. He was a broad-shouldered black and white tabby tom with green eyes. Birdpaw

saw that there was no other cat with him, and wondered where his clanmate was supposed to be.

"Hello. My name is Eagleflight," the tom dipped his head. "I'm from Fireclan, and another warrior was scheduled to come with me, but he came down with greencough and others are also sick. We could not spare any more warriors, so I came alone. However, I think that things should be fine with the five of us."

"Greetings, Eagleflight, Nightpelt, Hazelpaw." Falconclaw meowed, and flicked his tail for every cat to sit. "I believe we are here to discuss our traveling plans, correct?" Seeing that nobody objected, he continued, "Okay. In this case, if I may speak, I would like to ask the representatives from the two other clans a few questions." He glanced at Nightpelt and Eagelflight. Neither said a word; Nightpelt fixed his green eyes on Falconclaw, clearly not expecting for a young warrior like him to take the initiative.

Turning to Nightpelt, the tabby asked, "Have there been any recent attacks on your territory or any prey losses?"

The black warrior seemed to pause and think for a moment. "Yes, I believe so. It appeared to be on an edge of our territory, on the border that we share with Fireclan and the border that leads into the mountains (*I will try to get my hands on a territory map soon, and from there the borders will all make sense. Currently the Iceclan has the western part of territory, Fireclan with Northeastern, and Shadeclan in the south. Nightpelt is describing attacks on Iceclan's Northeastern border.*).

Falconwing nodded thoughtfully. Then, fixing his eyes on Eagleflight, he questioned, "How about Fireclan?"

"We lost prey on our border along Iceclan," the young warrior replied.

"In that case, this should be easy to solve. At dawn, we will meet here, and travel up to the places where the two clans lost prey, and we will try to find more clues. These places seem to be relatively close to each other, and perhaps we can find a trail that would lead us to the rogues' camp." Nightpelt concluded, gaze sweeping around

the cats. He then turned to whisper something into Hazelpaw's ear, who murmured something back after a moment of consideration.

Eagleflight stood up. "That sounds fine to me." Also gazing across the ring of cats, he proclaimed, "If there are no more concerns to address, I'd like to be getting back to my clan in order to rest for the night and prepare traveling herbs for our journey tomorrow."

Falconclaw simply flicked his tail in consent.

"In that case, let us be off. May Starclan light our paths!" Nightpelt proclaimed, flicking his ears.

Hazelpaw quickly bounded over to Birdpaw and whispered, "Hi! I have so many things to tell you! But I have to go now. Nightpelt will be cross with me if I delay longer. I'll talk to you tomorrow!" swerving around, she bounded after the senior warrior, their pelts blending into the darkness as they faded away.

Eagleflight nodded at each of them, then turned to head back to his own territory also.

Birdpaw looked to Falconclaw. He simply blinked at her, then turned to trot upwards toward Shadeclan's territory. Birdpaw dashed after him, breathless from anticipation.

I can't wait for the journey to begin!

~~~~~~

And there you go. :) About an hour's worth of writing. XD hehe. I couldn't resist~ It's about almost 2 AM now here in my time. So I gotta go and sleep. Cya guys :D
~~~~~~

Chapter 13

***Unedited**

~~

Hi!! STAR Testing is officially over. :) (well actually it was gone on Friday so.. xD) I'll be back to writing. However...updates still are going to be slower than usual because our teachers are very determined to keep us working till the very last day. xD (but of course. high school will be wayyy harder, and I shouldn't be complaining.) I'll still try and update when I can though~ Thanks for sticking with me. :)

Confused, Birdpaw took in her surroundings. She was standing in the middle of a barren moor, and the only movement that could be seen was the grasses swaying with an occasional breeze. The sky was clear overhead, and it gave her an almost peaceful feeling. "Where am I..?" Birdpaw asked herself, feeling dazed.

"In your dreams," a soft meow answered her question. Birdpaw snapped to attention, only just realizing that she had spoken her thoughts aloud. Whirling around to defend herself, she braced for an attack. However, it was not an unfamiliar cat.

It was a beautiful, slender tortoiseshell she-cat with a white chest and paws. She bore the same striking green eyes as Birdpaw herself. If it weren't for the different pelt colors, Birdpaw would have sworn that they looked identical. The she-cat purred, and reached forward to touch noses with her.

"M..Mother?" Birdpaw stammered, taken aback.

Willowleaf brushed her tail against her daughter's cheek affectionately. "Birdkit-" she stopped herself, "-Birdpaw! My kit, you've grown so much!" she took a pawstep back, and studied Birdpaw closely.

"I missed you!" Birdpaw felt choked up with emotion, and these were the only three words that came to mind as she tried desperately to formulate her mixed up feelings into words.

Willowleaf had died when she was only a kit, and Birdpaw always thought of her, mourning her every night when she went to sleep in her nest. She remembered being jealous and resentful of the other kits, for they had a mother to curl up against. It was true that she had Fernpelt, but it just didn't feel the same. A lump rose in her throat, and Birdpaw swallowed hard, trying not to break down in anguish as well as joy.

Willowleaf stepped closer, their pelts brushing as she rasped her tongue between her daughter's ears. "I missed you too, dear one."

Closing her eyes, Birdpaw wished that this moment would freeze in time, for things to stay like this forever. However, she knew it was not to be. As Willowleaf stepped gently away, Birdpaw looked up into her eyes expectantly.

For a brief moment, Willowleaf looked slightly surprised. "You know that I came for a reason, didn't you?"

Birdpaw said nothing. They both knew the answer to that.

"Very well," Willowleaf blinked, and Birdpaw saw something flash in her mother's green eyes. However, she didn't recognize what it was. Pride? Approval? She wasn't sure.

For a few seconds they just stood, facing each other, studying each other. However, Willowleaf quickly broke the silence. "I have come to deliver a message," she mewed.

Birdpaw nodded, ears pricked.

When Willowleaf spoke again, Birdpaw felt a chill along her spine, for that voice sounded ancient, not the soft voice that her mother possessed. *This voice was different,* she thought. *It has a ring of prophecy to it.*

"You are the bird, destined to bring peace and freedom to both your clan and the forest itself. You will rid the clans of a dangerous threat, and

you will be the one to lead your clan out of a way of destruction. However, by putting your clan first, you will live a life full of hardships, full of heartbreak and pain. Freedom will only come to you when you have overcome them. But do not fear, for Starclan will walk with you, and so will your loved ones."

Willowleaf stared right into Birdpaw's eyes, voice filled with conviction. "Do not fear, my daughter. I will guide you through your dreams, and your warrior ancesters will forever be above you, lighting your path. Your life will be hard, but we all trust that you can live it through. You are the destined one."

"I...I...but I'm just an apprentice! I-" Birdpaw burst out, but Willowleaf was already padding away, with a flick of her tail as farewell.

"Mother! I don't understand!" Birdpaw cried out, but Willowleaf had already faded away. Only a trace of her warm scent remained.

Birdpaw jolted awake, her breath in shallow gasps. She was sitting up in her nest, in the apprentice's den. It was still dark outside, and there was no bustle of sound except for cats snoring.

"Birdpaw!" Falconclaw's face poked into the den, his eyes narrowed in concern. "Are you all right?" he asked, "You were twitching and talking in your dreams."

She shook her head. "I'm fine," she replied hastily. "What brings you here?"

Falconclaw stared at her incredulously. "You don't remember? It's almost dawn! We need to go soon!"

It took a moment for his words to register in Birdpaw's brain. Realization flooded through Birdpaw in waves of shame as she gasped. "Are we going to be late?" she was up and out of the den almost instantly, nearly crashing into Falconclaw as she scrambled out into the open.

The dark tabby snorted in annoyance. "No, but we're going to be if you don't hurry up. Come on, we need to go to Violetfoot to get our

traveling herbs." He jerked his chin in the medicine den's direction, and padded towards it.

Birdpaw scrambled after him, yawning.

~*~

"Here, eat these." Violetfoot dropped a bundle of odd-smelling herbs at Birdpaw's paws.

Falconclaw had already obediently swallowed his, but even he couldn't resist wrinkling his nose in a grimace as he ate them.

Birdpaw sniffed the herbs carefully. "Do I have to?" they didn't seem too appetizing.

"No, but you'll need them." the medicine cat meowed tartly. "Do you want them or not? I haven't got all day." Violetfoot flicked her tail crossly.

Birdpaw let out a loud sigh, but licked them up as she was told. They were disgusting, but getting Violetfoot angry wasn't a good alternative.

"Come on, Birdpaw!" Falconclaw called from the entrance.

Birdpaw waved her tail to show that she heard, and she thanked Violetfoot hastily for the herbs. She bid them a safe journey, and Birdpaw dipped her head in thanks.

"Coming!" she called out as she bounded out of the medicine den.

Blacktail was perched on top of a tree stump at the camp entrance, tail curled neatly over his paws. As Falconclaw padded up to him, they exchanged a wordless greeting of farewell. Blacktail nodded at Birdpaw.

"Good luck, you two." his voice was indifferent and carefully controlled, but his amber gaze held a glint of worry.

"Thanks, Blacktail. We'll be careful not to die," Falconclaw joked. "After all, I have to bring your apprentice back in one piece, eh?"

Blacktail snorted. "It's better if you don't bring her back. She's too much of a pain in my tail."

"Hey! I'm not-" Birdpaw protested indignantly, but never got to finish her sentence.

"Come on, Birdpaw. We have to go!" Falconwing headbutted her in the direction of the forest. Birdpaw grumbled something under her breath, but followed him as he bounded away.

Goodbye, Shadeclan! Hopefully I'll see you soon.

~*~

It seemed like they were the first ones at the meeting place, for the clearing was empty. Falconclaw's tail twitched in impatience as he looked around, waiting for any signs of the other cats. Birdpaw simply sprawled out and watched as the sun peeked above the horizon, letting a faint glow of red soak into the earth.

Birdpaw watched as the sun rose slightly higher, little by little, until it was almost halfway visible. Just then, she heard movement, and realized it was Falconclaw. He had stood up, and was padding away. Birdpaw rushed to her paws, and as she looked around, she saw that the cats have arrived. It was Nightpelt and Hazelpaw, streaming down the slope of the hill into the clearing to meet them. As Birdpaw looked right of that, she could make out Eagleflight's shape, a black and white blur as he ran towards them all.

"Sorry we're late," Nightpelt panted, skidding to a stop as he exchanged a polite greeting with Falconclaw and the others.

Hazelpaw had dashed over to Birdpaw immediately. "Hi!" she mewed brightly, eyes sparking in excitement.

~~~~~~

OH. MY GOSH. -_- I just realized that this science project is due tomorrow and I haven't even started. :/ Better start now...haha. I would have written more but I need to work now. The rest of this chapter will hopefully be up soon! Stay tuned. :) ~cinna
~~~~~~

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~UPDATED~~~

lol. I just realized. xD well, now for update #2 to finish this chapter!!! Sorry for keeping you all waiting D: but there was a ton going on in my life. :/ ahaha. sigh. well, here's the last half of the chapter~

"Hey!" Birdpaw flicked her tail in a friendly motion. "So...what's up?"

"Nothing much for us..." Hazelpaw mewed thoughtfully. "However, our prey has been running quite a bit lower these days, which is strange because it's greenleaf right now."

Birdpaw nodded slowly. "Shadeclan's prey has taken a slight dip also. Maybe it's the rogues?"

"Well, we'll teach them a lesson to stay off our lands!" Hazelpaw narrowed her eyes, tail lashing.

Birdpaw hissed in agreement, knowing that the rogues had absolutely no right to be trespassing on clan territory. However, something nagged at her, causing her to hesitate. *Blade is a rogue too...and he's my friend. Is he at fault also?*

"...hello? Birdpaw?" Hazelpaw's questioning mew shook Birdpaw out of her thoughts.

"Huh?" she mumbled, shaking her head to rid herself of her questions.

Her friend prodded her with a paw exasperatedly. "Well, it's time to go," she cast a look at the other cats who are already standing.

Birdpaw nodded, regaining the excitement that was rushing through her limbs. Eyes sparkling, she dashed off towards the others, calling back to Hazelpaw to catch up.

As she fell into step beside Falconclaw, she asked, "So..where are we going?"

He gave her a puzzled look. "You weren't listening?"
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

"...listening to what?"

Falconclaw gave a exasperated snort. "We were just discussing about where to go, and we decided to follow along the boundaries of Iceclan and Fireclan towards the outskirts of their territories. That's where most of the prey has been lost, so we're going to take a look around that area first. If you've been listening," he shot a look at her, "then you would have known that. Mouse-brain..." he muttered under his breath.

"It's all right, Falconclaw," Nightpelt had padded up beside them, and now he was giving Birdpaw a level stare. "She's just an apprentice, and apprentice need to learn many lessons before they become warriors. Birdpaw apparently hasn't learned how to listen properly yet." There was a glint of mischief in his green eyes. Birdpaw instinctively knew that he was a reasonable cat from the way that he pardoned her through a joke.

Falconclaw gave no answer. Instead, he huffed, "Well, we'd best be picking up the pace. It's going to be sunhigh soon." Then, he picked up his speed and went ahead of Birdpaw and Nightpelt.

"Are you two normally like this?" Nightpelt asked Birdpaw, a hint of curiosity in his voice.

"I...don't know..." Birdpaw stammered. Falconclaw was her friend after they made peace...but recently they've gotten really short-tempered with each other. "Recently he's gotten a lot more impatient, but he's one of my friends."

Nightpelt simply nodded, gazing after the tabby.

~*~

"Halt!" Nightpelt called suddenly.

As the others began to head over, Birdpaw saw that Hazelpaw and Eagleflight were padding side by side, as if good friends. However, before she got a chance to head over and ask for an introduction, Nightpelt took charge.

"It's almost sundown. I was thinking that we'd stop to hunt, and rest

in for the night. How does that sound?" the black warrior asked.

"Great!" Birdpaw squeaked, while Falconclaw and Hazelpaw nodded in agreement.

Eagleflight also approved. "I think it's a great idea. I'm starving!" he exclaimed, green eyes wide.

"I'm hungry too. Now that we've passed the clan territories, it's safe to catch prey. Who's going to hunt, while the others search for a good place to sleep?" Nightpelt asked.

Falconclaw stepped forward. "I'd like to go hunt, if no cat minds," he meowed politely. Glancing towards Birdpaw, he asked, "Do you want to come with me?"

"Erm...sure." Birdpaw was slightly caught off guard. After his attitude with her today, she was surprised that he was talking to her.

"Then it's settled. Hazelpaw, Eagleflight, and I will search for a good camping spot." Nightpelt nodded.

Falconclaw beckoned to Birdpaw with his tail, then turned around and disappeared into a clump of ferns. Birdpaw followed after him.

When they emerged from the other side, Falconclaw twisted so that he was facing her. Glancing down at his paws, he meowed, "Hey, I just wanted to apologize for my sharp tongue today. You didnt' deserve the insult. Sorry."

Birdpaw was taken aback. She didn't expect an apology from him, especially over such a small thing. "It's all right," she mewed awkwardly, "I guess it's my fault I wasn't paying attention."

"So...no hard feelings?" his amber gaze searched her.

"Nope."

"All right then." he opened his jaws to taste the air, and then dropped into a crouch. Birdpaw stood back and watched as he crept silently towards his target, some small animal that was scuffling

around a small bush.

Birdpaw never got the chance to see if he made his catch. The scent of rabbit flooded her nostrils, and she swerved around to see a white tail bob right past her. Giving chase, she quickly outran the frightened animal, and brought it down with a swift swipe of her paw. Purring with satisfaction, she admired her catch. The rabbit was nice and plump, good for a group of starving cats.

After she had caught another mouse, Birdpaw headed back to Falconclaw with her prey in her jaws.

"Nice rabbit!" he complimented. "It's the fattest I've seen in a long time."

Birdpaw's eyes shone with pride. "Thanks!" she exclaimed.

"Now. Let's get back to the others?" he asked, looking around.

Birdpaw nodded in consent.

As the two of them headed towards the makeshift camp, a sharp crackling noise startled Birdpaw. "Wh...What was that?" she squeaked, hopping backwards a small step closer to Falconclaw.

He scoffed. "I stepped on a twig."

Shame flooded over her. "Oh."

~~~~~~

Just thought I'd end with a bit of makeshift humor xD haha. Once again, sorry for ditching you guys >.<

^^ Summer's coming. yayyyy~ B4N!! ~cinna
~~~~~~

URGENT ANNOUNCEMENT

HI THERE!!!

So I've decided to make a drastic change in plans. Blacktail IS NOT going on the journey. It's just Falconclaw and Birdpaw. There are many reasons that I decided on it...so yeah. >.< Sorry!! I'm going back to edit everything, and this is just for those of you who HAVE read the unedited version and were wondering where Blacktail is gonna be when I post the new chapters. haha this is sooo confusing xD Sorry guys~ ATF will be updated soon.

~cinna <3

Chapter 14

***Unedited**

~~

Hi >.< It seems that I've...forgot about updating for a while LOL Well, here I am, writing to you all xDDDD haha. Hopefully I'll be updating more often.

Birdpaw and Falconclaw found the others located in the midst of a ring of gorse bushes. Hazelpaw and Eagleflight had even managed to find some moss, and were lining them thinly along the ground, so that sleeping would be slightly more comfortable for them all.

"We're back!" Falconclaw announced brightly, setting down the prey the two of them had caught. The others bounded over eagerly to eat and rest. After a long day of traveling on an empty stomach, everyone was tired and hungry.

"Hey, Hazelpaw! Do you want to share something together?" Birdpaw offered.

The brown she-cat looked torn for a second. "Um...but I'm already sharing with Eagleflight..." she mewed guiltily, looking down at her paws. "Sorry, Birdpaw!"

"Um...that's all right," Birdpaw was slightly surprised. Since when had Hazelpaw gotten to be friends with the Fireclan tom? "I guess I'll just share with Falconclaw then."

She invited the dark brown tabby to share with her, and he agreed eagerly. "Sure!" had been his response.

For a moment, they ate in silence. However, soon, their bellies were pleasantly full, and small chatter began to spread among the cats. Hazelpaw and Eagleflight had come over to join Birdpaw and

Falconclaw in their conversation, and the four were now huddled in a small group, exchanging jokes and gossip. Nightpelt, who seemed uninterested in these matters, simply stood alone on a rock, keeping watch.

"You know, Goldpaw, my sister, has a crush on her mentor, Brackentail~!" Hazelpaw exclaimed, amusement in her eyes. "It's hilarious to see her doting on him everywhere!"

Birdpaw blinked. "She's still not over him?!"

"Nope!" was Hazelpaw's reply.

Falconclaw blinked. "What's a crush?" he asked.

"You don't know?!" Birdpaw stared at him incredulously.

He shook his head.

Eagleflight touched Falconclaw's shoulder with his tail-tip. "Well, it's basically when a cat really likes another cat, and they want to be mates."

Realization flooded over the tabby. "Oh! Sorry. I blanked out for a moment there. I get what it is now." Falconclaw muttered sheepishly.

The rest of the conversation was just easygoing chatter, and every cat was relaxed, fully accepting one another as friends. However, Birdpaw did notice that Hazelpaw seemed very close to Eagleflight. Almost...too close. She wasn't sure, but if there was something going on, Hazelpaw was a medicine cat apprentice. She wasn't allowed a mate, and definitely not a tom from another clan.

When they went to sleep that night, Birdpaw confided her fears to Falconclaw. "Do you think something might be going on between them?" she asked, concerned for her friend. She also noticed that the two were sleeping next to each other, closer than usual.

"I think you're worrying too much. Just watch them for a few days, and don't jump to conclusions too early. So far I think they're fine." was his answer with a big yawn.

Birdpaw nodded, and curled up next to him, also sleepy. "Well, good night. We need to sleep so we can travel tomorrow."

His only answer was a soft snore.

Nightpelt, who had the first watch for that night, was but a silhouette in the soft moonlight that washed upon them all. Birdpaw yawned, wondering if he was sleepy too. She stared at the moon for a while, admiring its beauty with a small sigh. However, with the soft breeze blowing through the vegetation, and the warm scents of her traveling companions wreathing around her, Birdpaw was soon fast asleep.

~~~~~~

Hopefully this chapter would be finished soon. >.< oh my gosh I have a HUGE writer's block. :/ gahhhhh. until I figure out what I'm gonna write, updates may still be really slow. Sorry~

but I'm trying, and I appreciate everyone who's stuck with me so far already :) Thank you all! ~cinna

~~~~~~~~~~EDIT: Okay, never mind. From now on, I'll just be like the other writers and post a complete chapter at a time. XD Sorry for this tiny tiny chapter. I'm trying to write right now...agh. ~cinna

Chapter 15

Hey there :/ Sorry for running away for such a long time...I said I'd write, but I ended up not, right? -.-" Yeah, sorry about that. Marching band is about to start...so I'll be away from the computer a lot and updates will be EVEN SLOWER. (is that even possible..) Really sorry~ But as I said before, this story is living on~<3 Birdpaw will live on!

Birdpaw yawned as a paw prodded her. "Get up!" a meow hissed in her ear.

She blinked open her sleepy eyes. "What is it, Falconclaw?" she asked, not thinking clearly because it was barely dawn.

Falconclaw's amber eyes shone with worry. "Just get up. Everyone's awake already, and we're talking about something important." he prodded her again, and Birdpaw hissed in annoyance.

"Okay okay, I'm awake!" she grumbled, sitting upright and giving herself a quick grooming. Although she wanted to sleep more, Birdpaw knew that something must be up, because everyone looked oddly worried. Nightpelt's tail twitched irritably, and Hazelpaw looked a bit worried.

"Is he back yet?" Nightpelt asked in a impatient tone. He was pacing back and forth now, black fur standing on end.

Birdpaw stared at him in confusion. "Is who back yet?"

"You haven't heard?" Falconwing asked her, before realizing. "Oh, right. You were asleep."

Birdpaw nodded slowly.

"Well, Eagleflight said he'd go hunting for us in the morning, and he's been gone for quite a while. He's still not back yet." the dark tabby explained hurriedly. "We were thinking about if we should go

and look for him." his eyes darkened as he added, "After all, we *are* getting close to rogue territory. It may be unsafe to go...alone."

Hazelpaw frowned. "I, er, we have to find him!" her green eyes were wide with anxiety.

Birdpaw gave her a strange look. "Why are you so concerned?"

"He's part of our group! Aren't you concerned?" Hazelpaw retorted, although Birdpaw could see that the brown she-cat was a bit flustered. "I mean...he is very nice and all..."

Birdpaw rolled her eyes. She would interrogate Hazelpaw later. What's important is they have to find Eagleflight.

"Should we try and go find him now?" Hazelpaw asked. "Or should we stay?"

Nightpelt was thoughtful. "That's a tough question. If all of us leave the camp, then if Eagleflight comes back he won't be able to find us. Although...if he doesn't come back and we just sit around like this it's not a very good idea either."

Falconclaw flicked his tail. "He can always follow our scent trail," he reasoned. "I say we should leave and search for him."

Hazelpaw nodded in agreement. "The scent of three cats should be stronger than one, so he'd probably be able to find us sooner or later."

Birdpaw nodded. "Sounds like a good idea to me!" she stood quickly, shaking out her pelt. "So what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

Just then, a new voice entered their hearing ranges. "Go where? Without me?"

All four cats stiffened, and they turned as one, gazing at the cat that just came into view. Birdpaw breathed a sigh of relief, seeing that it was Eagleflight. "Hey there, Eagleflight. We were just about to go off and find you!"

The black and white tom looked surprised for a second. "I was

just...exploring the area. Although, I did find out some interesting things." his green eyes darkened with worry.

Hazelpaw cocked her head, and flicked her tail for him to continue. "What did you find?"

"Well, the thing is, I smelled cats. Other cats, as in not any clan scents. There were many, so I doubt they're loners." Eagleflight explained, voice lowered a notch. His tail flicked back and forth in anxiety as he added, "They were pretty fresh too, so I decided to head back before we made an encounter or something."

Falconclaw nodded thoughtfully. "So you're saying that maybe we're getting close to where the rogues are camped?" he asked for clarification.

Eagleflight nodded gravely. "I believe so."

Nightpelt hissed. "Well, that's not important, since we were supposed to come and find them anyways. The thing is, we need to figure out what to do *once* we find them."

Birdpaw nodded. "Then...what should we do?" she asked, out of ideas. "Do we approach them, or spy?"

Hazelpaw shook her head. "No, I don't think spying would work. Our scents would give us away, if our noise doesn't first. I guess the only way is to approach them."

Looking at the brown she-cat, Falconclaw's eyes lit up. "I think I got it! If we can't beat them, *join them."* he meowed. "We'll join them! Or at least...pretend to, while we're figuring out their plans and spying."

Eagleflight nodded. "That sounds like a good idea to me," he meowed approvingly. "Should we leave now? There's not much time to waste. Each day we sit around doing nothing, we waste more precious prey for our clanmates and risk bloodshed."

Nightpelt had already stood, green eyes flashing with determination. "Let's go, then. Eagleflight, lead us to where you found the scent marks. We can use those and try to find the rogues'

nest."

The black and white tom nodded, before flicking his tail and darting off. "This way," he called back to the rest of them.

Falconclaw followed, with Birdpaw and Hazelpaw on his heels. Nightpelt brought up the rear, turning around every now and then to look out for potential threats.

~*~

Eagleflight's tail lashed in irritation. "Fox dung, I think I lost the trail!" he cursed, before turning back to the others with an apologetic look. "Sorry, the trails are just everywhere, and I'm not too sure which one to follow." he explained. "Plus, some are fresh and some are stale, so they're a bit confusing to navigate."

Falconclaw rested a tail-tip comfortingly on the tom's shoulder. "It's all right, we understand." he meowed.

Eagleflight sighed. "I'll try my best to find the trail again." he crouched, nose pressed against the ground. They were now in a forest, but not the forest that Birdpaw knew. No, this forest was different. The trees were unfamiliar, and they seemed to be barely blocking out the sun. The light danced over them in strange shadows, and Birdpaw flinched as a ray hit her eye.

"Or, we can just wait until we see a rogue come by," Nightpelt suggested. "Sniffing and going in circles all day certainly won't help with progress."

It was true. The trees looked the same, and Birdpaw was pretty sure they've been at this spot for at least three times already. The brown she-cat sighed, feeling restless. "So what do we do? Sit around and do nothing until we see a cat?"

"Unless you want to keep going and somehow find the way, I guess so." Falconclaw answered half-heartedly.

Everyone was getting impatient, Birdpaw noticed. Well, Nightpelt was like a green eyed version of Blacktail. Both were impatient and prickly, but Birdpaw knew they were sensible cats who wouldn't

jump on rash decisions. Falconclaw was trying his best to keep himself and Eagleflight calm.

Eagleflight was getting very agitated. Maybe it was because he blames himself for leading the group in circles. Birdpaw didn't blame him, she knew it was hard to follow so many scent trails at once. She only hoped that Eagleflight would understand that no one was angry at him.

Just then, something hit her.

Blaze. She had forgotten all about the ginger tom who she met every half-moon. Birdpaw wondered where he was now. Maybe he was with the other rogues? If she came to the rogue's camp, he would recognize her as a clan cat. He definitely would. What if he became suspicious? What if he asked her about it?

And what was worse, what if she accidentally spilled it all to him?

A chill ran down Birdpaw's spine as she realized her very existance can ruin this entire quest.

~~~~~~

Man, going around in circles sure isn't fun :3 but I can't have the journey be so easy! XD

Drama is starting to tense up now. ;) Hopefully you all are enjoying it~

I'm very sorry that I'll become a lot busier than I have before, so there will be even slower updates ;A; (as I said before.)

Well, please stay tuned! Hopefully I'll find time to update this~ ^^

~cinna<3
~~~~~~

Chapter 16

Hey guys~ I'm so so sorry for disappearing for like... a month or two. :/ School started, and I've gotten a lot busier. :(Real life has to come before my story, right? *bows* </3

Well, here's Chapter 16. ;A; Please forgive mehh~ xP

A few days have gone by, and they have had no luck. To be honest, Birdpaw and her companions were completely, utterly lost. It was as if the forest was working against them. Sometimes they would catch a scent nearby, but it would vanish just as quickly as it appeared. The group was getting increasingly frustrated each other, and some of them have even started to bicker. It wasn't a good sign, because teamwork was a critical asset to their success.

"So what should we do now? I think there's something wrong." Falconclaw's amber gaze was scorching with intensity and poorly-hidden frustration.

Eagleflight's tail lashed. "What do you mean there's something wrong? I think what's wrong is doing this in the first place! What are we going to do anyways? Kill as many rogues as we can before they kill us?"

"No, Eagleflight. Have you forgotten what we're here for? We need to spy on them, and try to find out information about them so our clans can develop plans on how to work the prey problem out." Hazelpaw pointed out rather calmly, licking a paw and drawing it over her ear.

Eagleflight ignored her, or was at least too preoccupied with glaring at Falconclaw, who was glaring back.

Birdpaw's eyes darted between the two toms, and quickly rose to step between them. "Wait! You can't fight! We're supposed to work together!" she pleaded, eyes wide with desperation.

"You want me to work with him?" Falconclaw muttered with a dirty look.

"Starclan, no! I'm not following *his* orders for all the prey in the forest!" Eagleflight responded in an equally nasty tone.

Birdpaw fell silent. How could they argue at a time like this? She didn't know what to say, only letting out a sigh of exasperation.

Nightpelt, who had been silent all this time, suddenly sprang up. "Stop, all of you! Why are you fighting at a time like this?" his eyes blazed with such fury that everyone stopped to look at him. Even Falconwing and Eagleflight seemed a bit caught off guard.

The black warrior's pelt bristled as he continued, "Don't you understand? The main troubles of a group journey, especially one from different clans, is learning how to work together. If we can't do so now, then how are we going to save our clans together? Think!"

The group took a small moment to let Nightpelt's words register, but Eagleflight quickly broke the silence. Padding over to Falconclaw, he lowered his eyes. "Look, I'm sorry, Falconclaw. I shouldn't have been so rude to you. I..." he trailed off, unsure of how to keep going.

Falconclaw shook his head. "No, Eagleflight. I was at fault too, and I'm sorry for insulting you. I didn't mean what I said." his gaze shifted uncomfortably, and there was an awkward moment between the two toms, both equally unsure of how to respond to one another.

Just then, Birdpaw picked up a scent. No, not one, in fact. There were three, one of which strangely familiar. "You two! Stop standing there and doing nothing!" she hissed to them before softening her tone, "Can you smell something?"

Falconclaw tasted the air, before nodding grimly.

Eagleflight cleared his throat uncomfortably. "So...what do we do now? We-"

He was cut off as there was a rustling in the bushes.

The entire group swerved around as one, just in time to see three lithe shapes emerge from the juniper.

One of them instantly sprang forward in an attack stance. "Who are you and where do you come from?" the cat demanded. It was a muscular tomcat who was about twice the size of Birdpaw, she observed.

The other cats were not quite as rash. Flicking his tail, one of them signaled for the first tom to relax. "Steady, Hawk. We do not know who they are yet." he muttered. Hawk was obviously not satisfied, but he obeyed reluctantly and slipped back to stand by the others.

Turning back to them, the second cat, a scarred brown tom, curled his lips in a sneer. "What brings you to our territory?"

Birdpaw shot Falconclaw a look. How were they supposed to answer this? He returned her gaze, equally confused.

Thankfully, Nightpelt stepped forward. "Greetings. I am Night, and we are a group of friends who search for teritory. We were chased out of our own, some time ago, and upon hearing that there were cats living here, we wanted to ask if we may join you."

The brown tom's sneer widened. "Oh really? Well, I suppose that we will have to escort you to our camp so you may be....evaluated." he finished with a glint in his eye as he looked the group over.

Hazelpaw flinched as the tom looked at her, and it was evident that she was nervous. Birdpaw quickly stepped over and stood in front of her friend protectively, as if daring the tom to get nearer.

"A protective one, aren't you?" he tutted mischievously, before pausing in a dramatic sigh. "Anyways, I must introduce myself. I am Clawface, and these are my companions." he pointed with his tail at the two cats standing behind him.

"This is Hawk, as you may have met already," Clawface continued, but Birdpaw wasn't listening.

Her gaze locked with the third cat, also a tom. Except this tom was different. His pelt a dark, brilliant ginger, his emerald eyes seemed to bore into Birdpaw's inner core, as if seeing her crystal clear, inside and out.

It was Blaze, Birdpaw realized with a dawning horror. Just as she expected, he was with them.

And judging by how he was studying her, he knew about Nightpelt's smooth lie. About who they were and where they came from. He knew.

But...Blaze was on their side, right? He was Birdpaw's best friend. He would protect her, and her group...wouldn't he?

Birdpaw couldn't breathe.

~~

ehehheh. I was actually writing this chapter about a month ago, but I got a writer's block in the middle and stopped. :/ I had a little bit of freetime today, so I thought about finishing it. >.< Sorry that it might be a little short...

Anyways. I hope that I'll have time to write sometime in the future :/

Hope you liked this...chapter! More drama coming along soon.

~cinna

Chapter 17

Hey. This is a horribly short chapter. but...I've left you guys hanging for half a year already. I think I'm just going to publish this so you guys have a little something to hang on to >.< My writer's block is really getting the best of me, and I'm not sure how to link this current part to the next major part of the storyline...and real life is kinda hectic. Hope you guys enjoy :/

"Birdpaw? Birdpaw!" a voice shook Birdpaw out of her whirling thoughts, bringing her back to reality.

She looked around, slightly dazed and confused. Her fur prickled with embarrassment as she asked Falconclaw, "What did I miss?"

The tabby just gave her a strange stare. "We've all introduced ourselves. It's your turn now," he pointed with his tail towards the three rogues standing their impatiently. Or at least, Hawk looked like he was about to pounce any moment. Birdpaw shuddered inwardly at the thought.

"Um, right." Birdpaw cleared her throat awkwardly, just about to speak before she realized that she had to give her name. Her name. Blaze knew her name. If she lied about it now, he would know and maybe he would even tell Clawface about it...which wasn't good, considering the fact that they needed to gain the rogues' trust right now. "I...my name is..."

"Her name is Bird," Falconclaw came to her rescue, finishing her sentence for her. "Sorry, she's fierce, but actually quite shy when it comes to stranger cats." he gave her a pointed look, as if asking her to play along.

Birdpaw just stared back, before nodding vigorously. After all, now that the lie is out, why not stick with it until the end? It wasn't like there was any other way to go about this anyways. She shrank into her pelt, peering at the three toms with wide eyes. Hopefully they'd buy it.

Thankfully, Clawface did not seem to question them any further. He simply heaved a sigh, and meowed, "Very well. I shall bring you to our leader, and from there on she will be the one to judge of your fates, and if you get to join us or not. Remember, I am not responsible for casualties." his eyes held a glimmer of sarcastic hostility in them as they raked over the cats suspiciously. Hawk snickered, but Blaze simply remained silent, his green eyes deep and unreadable.

Nightpelt dipped his head to Clawface, appearing obedient and respectful. However, Birdpaw can see that his claws were slightly unsheathed, trembling from the effort of hiding them in his pads. His eyes were hard with an unreadable emotion that could only be described as bitter hatred as he followed after Clawface, Birdpaw and the others soon behind.

As Birdpaw followed along, she began to daze off and rethink their day...especially the first encounter with the rogues. It actually slightly amused her to see stubborn old Nightpelt show respect to a rogue. Birdpaw had an urge to let out a small mrrow of amusement, but tried to hold it back since she didn't want her ears clawed off. Plus, her groupmates all had grim expressions on their faces.

Well...sort of. Out of the corner of her eye, she seemed to see Hazelpaw and Eagleflight padding side by side, murmuring things to one another almost secretively. It lightened Birdpaw's heart to see her friend get along so well with him. At least that way, Hazelpaw probably wouldn't notice Birdpaw's troubled state.

On another thought, she had other things to worry about. Birdpaw really needed to talk to Blaze...whether it was as a friend or enemy. She needed to know who's side he really was on, and why he hasn't exposed them by now. Birdpaw held a faint hope that Blaze was really a friend of the Clans and would help them in the upcoming conflicts.

Birdpaw sighed, and tried to push all those worries out of her mind. She didn't want to be tormented by these things all day and night long, especially since it was important to focus on not blowing their cover. Falconclaw seemed to have noticed her distress though, because he leaned over to whisper in her ear, "Hey, you all right?"

"I'm fine," she whispered back, knowing full well it was a complete lie. She hated lying to friends...but what else could she do? Tell him that she was friends with a rogue who could blow their cover and mission in a heartbeat?

Falconclaw simply nodded, and gave her ear a brisk lick before quickening his pace to catch up to Nightpelt. Birdpaw stared after his dark tabby form, slightly surprised at his friendliness. Her heart warmed, though, and she silently prayed to Starclan that everything would be all right.

~*~

"I will go and report to our leader about the lot of you. Meanwhile, stay here and don't move a muscle, or Hawk has my full permission to rip your pelts off. Remember, this is our territory." Clawface had sneered at Nightpelt and the rest of the group as a final warning before turning heel and disappearing into the rogues' camp. Birdpaw stared after his battle-scarred form, resisting a shudder at what kind of battles he must have fought to obtain those wounds. Instead, she turned her gaze to her new surroundings.

The rogues' camp was actually somewhat similar to a regular clan camp in Birdpaw's eyes, except much rowdier. There were small dens scattered about, but it was evident that the cats did not live together in large groups like the clans did. They seemed to be separate little families, all clumped together in one general area.

The environment was unappealing too; it was clear that some cats never bothered to clean out bedding, for the entire camp reeked of dung and some other source that Birdpaw couldn't recognize. A distant kit's mewling could be heard, as well as a frantic mother's voice as she tried to comfort her young. A few toms wrestled in the sand on the other side of the camp, fighting over a dead rabbit. Every cat looked thin, tired, and desperate.

Despite all this, Birdpaw snuck a peek at Blaze, who was standing a bit further off from the group. He looked the same as always, mysterious and composed, but Birdpaw thought she detected a glimmer of emotion in those deep green eyes. Was it...confusion? Worry? Sorrow? *Perhaps a mixture of all*, Birdpaw mused to herself.

Just then, the ginger tom stiffened, and he slowly turned his head around until he was staring directly at Birdpaw. Birdpaw's eyes grew wide, and she immediately shifted her gaze so that she was looking at her paws instead. Pelt bristling from embarrassment and anxiety, she shuffled her paws in the dirt and pretended that nothing happened.

She could feel his smoldering green gaze on her, but relaxed when she mustered the courage to look up and realize that they held nothing but amusement. Birdpaw was about to think that she could finally breathe safely again, until she saw what, or rather *who*, was approaching the group.

Clawface was right behind the cat. "Meet Greenfur, the leader of us."

~*~

"So, who are the lot of you, and why are you here?" the she cat asked bluntly. It was an unfamiliar, sharp voice that radiated a chilling authority which sent shivers down Birdpaw's spine. That voice belonged to who must be the leader of the rogues, a small statured yet wiry she-cat with brilliant green eyes. A patch of her mottled brown fur was stained a strange green color, but aside from that Birdpaw had to admit that the she-cat was rather beautiful. Not in the kind, motherly way like the queens were, but a more wild, tough look. Birdpaw instantly felt inferior to her.

Nightpelt stepped forward and introduced them all again, using the nicknames that he had used last time with Clawface. It was evident that he was doing his best to repeat the same story again without any loopholes as to not arouse suspicion. Once or twice, he stumbled, but it seemed to be all right in the she-cat's standards. "Very well," Greenfur sighed. "I have some duties to take care of, but Clawface, why don't you show these *newcomers*-" she emphasized that last word, "-around camp and introduce them to *our* ways. We don't want them getting lost in their new home now, do we?" The she-cat then trotted away, not sparing the group another glance.

"Yes, Greenfur." Clawface muttered after her retreating figure,

before turning to face the group with a snarl. "Now, like our leader said, the lot of you need to adjust to life here in order to fit in. I will now give you a tour of what life as one of us is like, just so you know what's going on. Being one of us can be quite dangerous if you're not aware of who's around you, you see." there was an underlying threat in his last words that sent a shiver down Birdpaw's spine.

Clawface may be intimidating and ruthless, but he was right. Birdpaw's thoughts strayed to Blaze again, and she grew even more anxious. *Who really is on our side?* As she looked around her small group of fellow clanmates/non-clanmates, her green eyes grew dark with worry.

Furthermore, can there be a traitor among our midst?

Please vote/follow/comment? <3

Chapter 18

[image]

I really should not be doing this right now o3o but I have to update, because this will likely be my last one before school starts and stuff gets hectic. >3< Please enjoy! I love you guys. (:

Oh, and by the way. This chapter includes something special :3 it involves the point of view of a minor character in this story. <3 Hope you like it~ HINT: Her picture is included in today's chapter. Her eyes are a wonderful mixture of green and blue...

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, as Clawface showed the group around the Rogues' various "territories". He had also explained to them some basic parts of life according a Rogue's way, which happened to be much different from a clan cat's life. Birdpaw was not surprised, though, since they were called Rogues after all...but it was odd that as Clawface spoke, he compared his life to a clan cat's life in many ways, as if he knew everything there was to being a clan cat. It was also strange that he seemed to be very proud of his current state, and always said things like, "Oh, the clans would not enjoy such luxuries as this," or "Clans are as stupid as a mouse tail...we are much better."

Right now, it was evening, and the forest was starting to get darker. The birds had ceased their chirping, and only rustling of bushes and the wind surrounded the group. They had finished the tour, and Clawface was now explaining for the third time today about the Rogues and what they were. But...this time seemed a bit different, as the tom seemed more excited than ever and branched out into facts that sent more chills down Birdpaw's spine.

"We are the Rogues. Not simply rogues, but the Rogues. We are solitary, living together simply for security's sake," the scarred tom had meowed gruffly, "Therefore, you are usually left alone to do your own thing. You may wander around anywhere you like, talk to whomever you wish, and nobody would care. However, there is one

little thing-"

"Yeah?" Birdpaw had asked, urging him on with mild curiosity. The previous times, Clawface had just stopped there and moved onto other topics, but now he seemed to be divulging information that could be useful to the clans. But then, she realized that talking was a big mistake since Clawface's head snapped sharply to gaze her right in the eye.

The tom growled at her menacingly, causing Birdpaw to take a few steps back, accidentally bumping into Falconclaw who was sitting a little ways behind her. The tabby steadied Birdpaw by nudging her forward gently so she would stop backing up, and curled his tail around her almost protectively. Clawface seemed as if he would like to make a remark of some sort, but instead of voicing it he refrained from doing so.

"Anyways, as I was saying before a certain someone rudely interrupted me," the brown tom aimed a glare at Birdpaw's direction, "There is one little thing that we do together every new moon. We hold a meeting, a very special one. In the meeting Greenfur addresses us all as a leader, instructing us on our next missions towards our ultimate goal or just informing us of our conditions. For we are not just simply rogues. We're also a group, with common interests and, under the lead of Greenfur, we will turn those goals into reality."

Birdpaw didn't understand what the brown tom meant by "ultimate goals", or "common interests", or their "missions", and was about to open her mouth to ask, but a look from Falconclaw silenced her. He was right - talking right now would probably get her pelt ripped off, and they haven't even succeeded in figuring out information yet.

"Wise choice, little kit," Clawface sneered approvingly. Birdpaw's eyes widened, as she did not realize that the tom had been watching her all this time to notice when she wanted to say something. Horror crept upon her when she realized that under this bloodthirsty cat's rash actions lied a whole new aspect of his character - a keen eye and a clever mind that Birdpaw suspected many "Rogues" around here must possess. And that, was a problem because what the little group needed to do was ultimately outsmart

them...and it just seemed to get harder after every heartbeat.

"Any newcomers are welcomed into our midst, as soon as they pass the Test of Faith. Ah yes, this includes the lot of you." the rogue's eyes held a glint of hunger in his eyes as he spoke, and it seemed to make everyone uneasy. "I'm sure that you will do fine...as long as you remember what it means to be one of us, of course." he slurred, unsheathing and then raising up a paw casually to inspect the jagged, sharp curves that ended in deadly points. He was either born with them or had somehow sharpened them carefully, because no cat Birdpaw had ever seen before possessed claws like those. Maybe that's where the brown tom had got his name, aside from his numerous scars.

Clawface then spoke nothing more, and he may have been expecting questions, but for a while no one from the group dared to utter anything. Hazelpaw looked just as terrified as Birdpaw, while Nightpelt and Falconclaw simply looked pensive. Eagleflight seemed to be torn over whether to say anything or not, but he must have decided because he broke the brief moment of silence.

"What...what is this Test of Faith you speak about?" the black and white tom inquired, his expression barely masking his worry.

Clawface simply said nothing for a bit, raking his gaze once again over the clan cats thoughtfully. A few heartbeats later, his expression scrunched up and his eyes narrowed into slits as he yawned lazily, "Oh, you will find out. Since new moon is tonight."

~*~

Violetfoot was busy sorting her herbs in her den. Clan life had bustled around like usual, but the problem of the lack of prey was getting more serious, and at the past Gathering, every cat she saw seemed to look more sickly and thin. Even the clan leaders have ceased their bickerings, perhaps from exhaustion and worry, but the medicine cat suspected that even they were starting to come to their senses that something more serious had to be going on than just the clans themselves. Violetfoot was also worried about the group that was sent off to investigate on whatever was happening. Muttering something under her breath, Violetfoot sighed and, placing the last

stalks of marigold away, stood up for a small stretch.

...Ancestors, please help us. Guide us the way, for we are lost. the blue-gray she-cat prayed.

Just then, as if it were a miracle of some sort, a ghostly pale figure seemed to appear from thin air. It swirled and shimmered, before revealing itself to be a lithe, tortoiseshell queen. The cat was paler than usual, and there was not much color except for the she-cat's haunting green eyes.

Violetfoot took a step back. "Willowleaf! What are you doing here? Starclan forbid...is this a vision, or am I just hallucinating?"

Willowleaf only shook her head. "I know that you've been waiting to hear signs from us. But...Starclan is not all-powerful. We do not know everything either."

"But, surely you can help us in some way! You cannot just abandon us to die..." the medicine cat pleaded, eyes dark.

"I...cannot tell you everything. But...just keep one thing in mind, Violetfoot." Willowleaf answered sadly, "Sometimes past decisions do not resurface until much later. And when they do, it becomes a nightmare to the present."

Violetfoot was silent, and the two she-cats just locked eyes with each other for a few heartbeats, before Willowleaf's pelt began to fade. "My time is almost up," the tortoiseshell sighed, but her green eyes bore into Violetfoot's blueish-green ones once more as she mewed fiercely, "Tell Silverclaw something for me. Tell him... *She is alive.*"

She is alive... What in Starclan did that mean?! Violetfoot was more confused than ever. But Willowleaf was fading fast, and right before she completely melted away into the wind, the medicine cat took a bounding step forward and cried, "Willowleaf, wait! I don't understand!"

But the queen had already vanished.

~*~

For a moment, Violetfoot just stood where she was, unmoving. She was never one for daydreaming, or thinking deeply; the she-cat had always believed that there were things to be done, and one must keep herself busy. However, she suddenly felt the need to just curl up somewhere and think for a few days.

Sighing, Violetfoot wasn't sure about what to do now. The herbs were all sorted, even though she could do quite nicely with an apprentice. But, warriors were needed badly right now, and the current kits weren't old enough. Hailstar was probably out on patrol...and Featherpelt was already doing too much due to the absence of her brother. Even Fernpelt was helping out with hunting, frequently leaving the kits to Violetfoot to take care of. There really wasn't...anything to be done for Violetfoot. Not at the moment. The kits were asleep, and they needed someone to watch over the camp.

But then, the medicine cat remembered Willowleaf's strange request. Oddly, she felt like she should know something about the vague message, but it was just somewhere in the corner of her brain, refusing to reveal itself. *Perhaps Silverclaw would know.*

Shaking her pelt as if it would rid her of all her jumbled thoughts, Violetfoot stood up and bounded quickly out of her den to see if the deputy had returned from his patrols yet.

The dens looked empty, and the nursery was quiet. It seemed that no cat was back yet, until Violetfoot spotted Silverclaw's familiar pelt as he just squeezed through the entrance to the camp, followed closely by Featherpelt. Both cats looked exhausted, as if they had been running the entire morning and afternoon. Violetfoot quickly padded over to the two of them, and after a brief check up of their conditions, asked to speak to Silverclaw privately. Plus, Featherpelt's left front paw was bleeding from a thorn stuck deep in the pad, so she was sent to the medicine den to wait for treatment and rest a while.

After the young warrior was out of earshot, Silverclaw turned his ice-blue eyes on Violetfoot. "What is it?" he asked. "Did Starclan send you a sign?"

"...Yes," Violetfoot choked out, before getting the urge to pour out

everything to the deputy, from Willowleaf's presence to the absence of Starclan. But then, she regained self control before opening her mouth and took a deep breath, before mewing, "Willowleaf wanted me to tell you that *she is alive.*"

Silverclaw was silent for a moment, before he finally asked, "Who is alive?"

"I...I don't know. She didn't tell me," Violetfoot confessed, ears flicking in frustration, but added hastily, "But I thought you would know, since she wanted me to tell you. Maybe you know this cat?"

The tom shook his head. "I don't understand her either, but I will think on it, and if I come up with anything, I'll be sure to let you and Hailstar know," he promised. "Meanwhile, you should probably tell Hailstar everything you heard, and then get some rest after treating Featherpelt. I know that you've been trying hard to get Starclan to talk to you, and you look horribly tired."

"I could say the same about you...as well as the rest of the clan," Violetfoot let out a small *mrrow* of amusement, before nodding. "I'll go do that. Good luck, and don't wear yourselves out. I can always skip a few meals."

"Don't say that! We all need food to keep our strength up." Silverclaw touched his tail-tip on the she-cat's shoulder comfortingly, before nodding and yawning. "I've been on night watch the entire night, so I think I'll go and take a nap now. Take care." he meowed, before turning around to pad across the camp, disappearing into the darkness of the warrior's den.

Violetfoot turned away, remembering that Featherpelt was still waiting. However, images of Willowleaf still kept on popping into her head, reminding her of the day when the two she-cats fought, and the tortoiseshell ran out, angry, gradually leading to her death the very same morning.

Yes, it was almost evening and Violetfoot was standing in plain sight, out in the clearing within earshot of any cat who came in. Yes, she was supposed to go treat her patients right now. Yes, she was not supposed to break down over the past. But...Violetfoot

couldn't help herself. "I'm sorry!" she burst out, to no cat in particular, "I'm sorry for your death...it was my fault." Violetfoot closed her eyes, wallowing in waves of regret and guilt. "I shouldn't have angered you that morning." her cry dropped down to a mere whisper. "I should've done something to save your kit."

The queen's spirit was already gone, so there was no way that she could've heard, but a breeze swept across the Shadeclan camp at that precise moment, and the cool wind seemed to swirl around Violetfoot, gently brushing past her fur and whispering back.

I forgive you.

~~~~~~

Oh my. Now wasn't that dramatic. :/

Comment/Vote/Follow! Thank you for being so patient with me. <3 I will try my best to update from now on...because through editing and finishing this chapter today, I regained interest and I realized how much I really miss my pretty kitties. (not in real life, but the characters) Stay tuned!

Rainii laubs you guys. xD <3
~~~~~~

Chapter 19

I finally got the inspiration to complete this chapter. TˆT it was kind of difficult to write, but I did it. <3 Please enjoy, and give me feedback!

Dedicated to xflutterflyx for being an awesome friend and inspiring me to start writing once more. (:

A shrill caterwaul rang through the camp. Cats stopped their scufflings, conversations, and other movements almost immediately, and a hush quickly fell over the them. Quiet shadows began to slink past the dens, around the trees, and under a large rock, where the source of the cry came from. Night had already fallen, but the skies were clear and the stars glittered as brightly as ever, casting strange rays of light to gently dance and shimmer as the tree branches wave in the breeze. Even the kits were there, hushed by their protective mothers.

Birdpaw, Falconclaw, and the rest of the group were seated directly below the rock, hidden by the shadows. No cat dared to utter a word, and for once, Birdpaw did not try to speak with anyone. She felt deeply afraid, as if there was something sinister about this gathering. It didn't feel like their usual Gatherings at home, where peace could be felt and cats could speak freely with one another.

No, this was different.

After all the cats have assembled, Greenfur, who was responsible for the caterwaul, stepped to the front of the rock. Birdpaw couldn't help but admire the she-cat; Greenfur looked dignified and breathtaking under the moonlight, with her chin up high and green eyes brimming with an emotion that could only be interpreted as pride.

"Greetings, my fellow Rogues! I trust that you all are doing well, since it is greenleaf?" Greenfur asked, although she didn't seem to expect an answer as she went on, "At least from what I have seen,

every cat has had enough to eat recently. However, we must share our prey now, with a few newcomers. Newcomers, please step out from where you're hiding and face your new clan." her eyes glittered down at the group almost tauntingly, as if daring them to come out.

Nightpelt quietly stood, and with a meaningful look to the rest of the group, padded out with a determined yet cool look in his eyes. Falconclaw followed his lead, and Birdpaw and Hazelpaw quickly scrambled after them. Eagleflight brought up the rear, eyes narrowing as a cat hissed in their direction.

Birdpaw tried to look for Blaze among the crowd, but there were too many cats and she couldn't tell his flame-colored pelt from all of the others. She gradually gave up and stuck close to the others, feeling anxious.

"When does the Test of Faith start?" some cat yowled from the crowd. Murmurs of agreement rose from the rest of the Rogues, and Birdpaw felt a shiver creep down her spine.

Greenfur snarled, and the Rogues shushed at once. Flicking her ears, the she-cat meowed, "The ritual will take place right now. Clear out some space, everyone." The crowd immediately began to shift noisily, muttering amongst themselves, and backed away until they completely enclosed the group in a large circle of open space.

The mottled she-cat looked down at the group and spoke, "Now, you have heard Test of Faith this, Test of Faith that, but you do not understand what exactly it is, correct?"

Nightpelt nodded after a brief heartbeat of hesitation.

"Well, the Test of Faith is that whenever we receive a newcomer, that cat must prove his worth before we accept him. This can be done in two ways, since you are a group and not an individual cat. One, you will send a representative of your group to fight one of our own, and if you win, then we will accept you. Two, you all fight against five of our cats, and once again, if you win then we will accept you."

"Wh-what happens if we lose?" Birdpaw blurted before she could stop herself.

Greenfur's eyes glinted in the moonlight, "Then you all die, of course. This is a battle to the death, is it not?" Flicking her tail dismissively, she asked, "So which do you choose?"

Falconclaw turned and whispered something in Nightpelt's ear, who in turn nodded. "We fight together, or not at all!" the tabby tom growled, claws digging into the dirt. Eagleflight's ears flattened as he nodded in agreement, but his tail curled around Hazelpaw's small frame protectively.

"Very well. Clawface, send them out!" Greenfur commanded, before sitting on the rock with her tail curled neatly on her paws, letting out a lazy yawn. Clawface, who's eyes were glittering with anticipation this whole time, nodded before beckoning with his tail. Four more shadows stepped out from the crowd, and Birdpaw craned her neck to see them more closely. There was the huge golden tabby tom named Hawk from earlier, a sleek black she-cat with cold blue eyes, a pale gray tom with a gruesome scar across his belly that looked as if it had been slashed open once, and a dark ginger tom with bright green eyes that looked horrifyingly like Blaze.

Blaze? Does this mean I need to fight against him? Birdpaw thought, horrified. She couldn't do that! He was one of her best friends, at the very least. She wasn't sure of her feelings towards him, but she definitely didn't want to fight him.

"Are you ready?" Clawface's growl snapped Birdpaw free from her thoughts. Feeling a very familiar pair of green eyes on her, Birdpaw looked away from the Rogues' representatives. She couldn't face Blaze like this. Instead, she turned to her own group, and whispered almost desperately, "Is there any way around this?"

Falconclaw's amber eyes showed only sorrow, and Birdpaw's hopes plummeted. "No, Birdpaw," he meowed gently, "I don't think we have a choice."

Eagleflight's pelt was bristling, from either fear or anger, or both.

"May Starclan watch over us," he mewed in agreement.

Birdpaw looked at each of her groupmates, wondering how in Starclan this was even possible. Each of the representatives looked like tough opponents, and she knew that Blaze was an exceptional fighter. On the contrary, she was just an apprentice, and Hazelpaw was supposed to train to be a medicine cat, so obviously she knew next to nothing about battle moves.

However, before she could turn around to say something else, the representatives charged.

Birdpaw didn't even have time to react. She immediately dove to one side, narrowly avoiding Hawk's deadly claws. However, as she spun around, she saw that he was charging towards her again, and this time she didn't have enough time to dodge properly. His claws slashed down on her left shoulder, and Birdpaw felt a sharp pain in that area. She crumpled, and was unable to get up because of how off balance she was now. Hawk pinned her onto the dirt, and his jaws opened wide, wide enough to snap her throat. Birdpaw closed her eyes, ready to accept her fate. *This wasn't how I was supposed to die,* she thought. *What was Hailstar thinking, sending me on this journey?*

However, suddenly the weight was lifted off of Birdpaw. Her eyes snapped open, and she struggled to stand as she saw Falconclaw, rolling in the dirt with Hawk. The two snarled and hissed at each other, until Falconclaw managed to throw the tabby tom off, and raked his claws down Hawk's flank. Hawk screeched in pain, and the two began to wrestle some more. Looking around, Birdpaw saw Nightpelt grappling with the black she-cat, their identical pelts a blur. It was amazing how the two looked so much alike, as Birdpaw couldn't even tell who was who. A bit further away were Eagleflight and Hazelpaw, trying to fight off Blaze and Clawface. It was clear that Eagleflight was practically protecting Hazelpaw though, since she wasn't trained to be a warrior in the first place. It was hard to fend off both cats at once, though, and Eagleflight was starting to look tired out.

Birdpaw raced over to help, but she was intercepted by pale gray tom with the scar. She snarled at him in frustration. She had to help

Eagleflight! "Little kit, learn to growl before you try and intimidate me!" the tom taunted her, before charging. Birdpaw didn't know what to do. How could she defeat this cat, who was obviously bigger, faster, and stronger than her? *His scar...* she realized. If she could open up that wound, then she could stand a chance of winning. Flattening her ears, she yowled loudly, and the tom's eyes flickered with hesitation, obviously stunned that such a small cat could have such a loud voice. Birdpaw took that as an opportunity, and dove underneath the tom, slashing at his scar with her claws. The wound split open, and his pale fur was quickly stained crimson with the blood. The tom screeched in pain, and lunged at Birdpaw, but sadly fell short and collapsed onto the dirt. He struggled and writhed, but due to that his scar fully split open and he was now splashing around in a pool of his own blood. It wasn't long before his movements stopped, and Birdpaw felt petrified with disgust and horror. Did she just kill a cat?

There was no time to feel sorry for the cat. Birdpaw looked around desperately for Eagleflight and Hazelpaw, and quickly located them at the center of the circle, still trying to fend off Clawface and Blaze. Birdpaw dashed over to them, and this time she wasn't interrupted by another opponent.

Eagleflight had scratches all over him, and it was obvious that if no one came to help, he was going to fight a losing battle. Birdpaw felt angrier than ever, and she let out a hiss before lunging at Clawface. Tackling him to the ground, Birdpaw hoped to buy Eagleflight some time so that he could defeat Blaze. However, part of her wanted Blaze to be safe, too. He was her friend.

Taking advantage of Birdpaw's confusion, Clawface aimed a swipe at Birdpaw's injured shoulder, but Birdpaw ducked and counterattacked with a swipe of her own. The two exchanged blows, until Clawface snuck past her and went to go help Blaze again. Birdpaw chased after him, furious. How dare he not consider her a worthy opponent?

As she approached the fighting cats, though, Birdpaw hesitated as she saw Blaze. She really, really didn't want to fight him. The ginger tom turned towards her, and the two locked gazes for just a few heartbeats, although it seemed like forever. "How could you?" she

croaked out, eyes full of bitterness and accusations. Blaze's green eyes seemed to flicker for a second, but he shook his head. "On the battlefield, there is no friendship," he mewed.

Birdpaw was about to reply, but she heard a screech of terror. She whirled around, only to see Hawk, creeping up on Hazelpaw. Her friend turned around to see the large golden tom towering over her, and she looked frozen in fear. Ignoring Blaze, she raced to protect Hazelpaw, but Eagleflight got there first. Leaping in between Hawk and Hazelpaw, he took a slash to the throat. The black and white tom fell to the ground, limp. Hazelpaw crouched next to him, frantic. "No, Eagleflight! Don't leave me!" she cried, either unaware or not caring about Hawk's raised paw, claws still dripping with Eagleflight's blood.

"Don't hurt my friends!" Birdpaw didn't even knew what she was doing anymore. The wound in her shoulder no longer hurt, and she felt her heart harden with every pawstep. As if the world slowed down in motion, she half scrambled, half ran over to Hawk with full speed and knocked him off his feet, her claws a tangled mess of fury. She slashed at him, ignoring everything else around her. Birdpaw heard a cat cry out her name, heard the crowd chanting for them to kill, and felt as if her shoulder were on fire, but she no longer cared. All she wanted to do was to kill this cat, and avenge her friend and groupmate's death.

But before she could fight any more, she felt a cat's jaws close around the scruff of her neck and drag her off of Hawk. It was Falconclaw, who shook his head firmly. Birdpaw was about to protest, but Greenfur stood and yowled, "I said stop already!"

Birdpaw looked around, and saw that every cat had stopped moving, and was looking at Greenfur. The mottled she-cat looked conflicted, but quickly brushed it off with a shake of her pelt. Green eyes cold, she meowed, "I believe that there has been enough bloodshed. Losing more of our own would be disadvantageous, and there are enough injuries already. Newcomers, you are now accepted into our ranks. Please introduce yourselves to your new clanmates, now."

Nightpelt, who was bleeding heavily from a wound in a flank,

shakily stood up and meowed, "My name is Night, and these are my fellow groupmates. We have come to seek shelter because leaf-fall is coming soon, and leaf-bare will quickly follow. We wanted to be a part of a bigger group so that we would be safe from starvation." The Rogues looked mildly interested, and there were murmurs among the crowd. However, the black she-cat with the cold blue eyes from before looked startled, if not angry. Her pelt bristled, but Blaze touched her shoulder with his tail-tip and she grudgingly calmed back down.

Falconclaw stood up next. Aside from a couple of scratches and a nick on his left ear, he appeared to be fine. "My name is Falcon, and our fallen groupmate here is Eagle. He was a brave cat, and we are very grieved for his loss." he aimed a pointed look at Hawk, who growled menacingly, but Falconclaw did not push him any further.

After Hazelpaw introduced herself, also glaring openly at Hawk, Birdpaw stood up and dusted herself off. "I'm Bird, and although I don't know many of you very well yet," she gulped nervously as her eyes met Blaze's, "I hope to get to know you in the future and I hope we can be the best of groupmates." she concluded shakily, sitting back down.

As her words fell, a few cats began to yowl their approval. Quickly, it caught up among many of the other Rogues, and they began to voice their encouragements for the group. Nightpelt dipped his head in acceptance, and the rest of the group followed his lead.

Greenfur flicked her tail for silence. As the cheers died down, she mewed, "Now that they have introduced themselves, it is time for us to all get rest now. The new members especially, since they have just lost one of their friends. Let us be dismissed now, and please return to your dens. Good night, everyone." And with that, she hopped neatly off of the rock, and disappeared into the shadowy bushes. The other cats quickly followed suit, and soon the clearing was empty with the exception of the group, and a few other Rogues. Blaze was among them, and he gave Birdpaw a terse nod before padding away.

Birdpaw collapsed onto the dirt, feeling dazed. She couldn't believe what happened to her. First, she killed a cat, which already seemed

too horrifying to be true. Then, she let Eagleflight die because she was distracted by Blaze; finally, she almost lost sanity with anger and Falconclaw had to drag her away to calm her down. "It's all my fault," she whispered hoarsely. Her entire body was shaking with fear, and she suddenly wished that Willowleaf was here to comfort her.

"Come now, Bird." a voice interrupted Birdpaw. She felt a warm pelt by her side, but it wasn't Willowleaf. Falconclaw was beside her, and he gave her ear a brusque lick. "Nothing is your fault. Eagle couldn't have made it, and it's not any cat's fault that Hazel was a medicine cat apprentice. Let's go and take care of Eagle's body now. I'm sure that he would've wanted to be buried properly." he gave her an encouraging nudge, and Birdpaw slowly stood back up.

Hazelpaw was crouched by Eagleflight's side, whimpering. "I killed him," she whispered over and over again. "I loved him, and thought we could be together..." Hazelpaw murmured.

Unsure of what to say, Birdpaw touched her tail-tip to her friend's shoulder. Falconclaw and Nightpelt stood back, knowing that the two apprentices wanted time to grieve.

Birdpaw felt a small piece of her heart starting to die inside. How could Starclan let this happen to them? She was so confused, so lost, and wanted answers. How were they going to even save the clans, if they couldn't even save Eagleflight?

The group remained silent, as if standing vigil for their fallen groupmate. Like statues, they kept watch like that without sleeping for a long, long while. The moonlight washed over them all as if trying to provide some comfort, and their pelts were illuminated gently. Even though their futures appeared to be dim, the stars were still shining brightly as always, as if giving them all a fragile sense of hope.

I hope you guys liked it :/ it was the first death out of many. Things will take a sinister turn from now on....but there will still be plenty of comforting scenes!

What do you guys think of the Rogues? :3

Remain hopeful, for I will update ASAP. <3 ~Rain

Chapter 20

I know it said in the previous chapter that I'd update soon...well, haha I lied. T_____T Updates are more painful than I thought.

I tried my best to get this chapter done ASAP, because I'm not going to be updating for a small while due to lots and lots of exams/other stuff. </3 I apologize for this, but hey you guys are used to it, aren't you? xP

But without further ado, sit back, grab a snack or a blanket, and enjoy the chapter. (:

Birdpaw couldn't resist but let out a pleased purr. She had just caught a fresh, plump mouse, and was eager to take it back to the Rogues' camp and share it with her friends. Or any cat, for that matter.

A small shadow at the back of her mind still nagged at her, though. *Do you truly deserve to be happy when Eagleflight just died last night? You even killed a cat...*

"It was an accident! I didn't mean to do it," Birdpaw hissed angrily to herself. Determined to push those thoughts away, she tried to think of other things. However, the moment where Eagleflight intercepted Hawk's blow with his own flesh couldn't help but show up right in front of her, over and over again. That heartbeat's worth of time, when everything seemed to freeze and the scene had imprinted itself into her mind as deeply as she held her most treasured memories.

"What was an accident?" a familiar voice called out from behind Birdpaw, who immediately whipped around to face whoever was there.

It was the one cat that she didn't want to see for the rest of her lifetime.

"Um, hi Blaze," Birdpaw mewed as calmly as she could. As if she wasn't mentally dying. As if everything was fine. As if he were still her friend.

The ginger tom seemed not to notice Birdpaw's distress, much to her relief. "Hello, how are you doing?"

"Fine," she muttered, not wanting to talk about how she felt at the moment.

Blaze didn't look convinced. "Are you still fretting over last night?" he moved closer, making Birdpaw even more uncomfortable.

Birdpaw turned her head away, not wanting to admit it. He was asking a stupid question, though. How could she *not* care about the horrors that happened? His nonchalant tone made it seem like it wasn't a big deal at all, when it actually was.

Blaze sighed. "Birdpaw..."

She stiffened. He used her real name.

He must have noticed, but didn't press on about it. Instead, he meowed softly, "I know it's really hard for you to bear right now, and I know that you must be furious at me, for attacking your friends. But you need to realize that this is the way of the Rogues. We see this quite regularly...we have no love for each other. Greenfur claims that we are a group, but in all honesty it's every cat for himself." his voice grew bitter with each word, and his green eyes became filled with an intense pain that gave Birdpaw the shivers.

She sat down next to him without a word, their pelts brushing together as if the contact would comfort them.

Birdpaw wanted to trust him. She wanted to tell him all her secrets...because he would be the only cat who could understand. However, she knew deep down that there would always be a trace of reserve between them. There was no way they could be together, whether as friends or as something more, no matter how much she wanted to. However, that didn't mean that she couldn't get to know

him better.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Blaze stood up abruptly, startling Birdpaw. The pained look in his eyes was gone, replaced by a steely determination. "I don't know how long you plan to stay here, but I'm sure you'll experience it for yourself soon enough."

"What, how? Wait-"

"I have to go, I'll see you later sometime, Bird," the ginger tom cut her off coldly. He then padded away and vanished behind a large clump of ferns, leaving a confused Birdpaw behind. So now he uses her fake name?

She stared after the lush shrubs even though the ginger tom was already gone, unsure of what to feel. Mindlessly, Birdpaw retrieved her fresh-kill and began to make her way back to the camp.

~~

Birdpaw stumbled back into the Rogues' camp, feeling quite numb inside. The mouse in her jaws tasted like nothing, and she was oblivious of everything around her until a mewling sound reached her ears.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts, and following the sound, her gaze landed on a queen and her two kits a small distance away. All three cats looked thin and starved, and the mother was anxiously trying to hush her kits. Birdpaw moved in closer, trying to hear what they were saying.

"Mother, I'm hungry! Why can't we go hunt?" one kit begged the small tortoiseshell queen.

"No, it's much too dangerous for me to leave you two alone out here," the queen answered, sounding tired and distressed.

"We can take care of ourselves!" the other kit protested

Their mother simply shook her head.

Birdpaw was confused. What did the queen mean by it was too dangerous? There were plenty of other cats around who could defend the kits. She decided to approach them.

Padding over, Birdpaw set down the mouse in her jaws and offered it to the tortoiseshell she-cat. "I'm sorry to bother you, but would you like this mouse?"

The queen's eyes widened in disbelief. "Are you actually giving it to me?"

"Um, yes," Birdpaw was startled. "I thought everyone was supposed to look out for each other here?"

"Then you are much too naive," answered the she-cat in such a sharp tone that Birdpaw visibly flinched. However, her gaze softened as she looked Birdpaw over. "But my kits and I must thank you for this favor that you've done us. Are you one of the new cats who arrived recently and passed the Trial last night?"

Birdpaw nodded, trying not to wince at the mention of the Trial. "I'm Bird."

"My name is Moss, and they are Cloud and Thorn." the tortoiseshell introduced herself, and then pointed to her two kits. One was a black and white she-cat, while the other was a black tom. Both kits held identical amber eyes that reminded Birdpaw faintly of a cat whose name she couldn't recall.

"Hello!" the two kits greeted Birdpaw enthusiastically, despite their bedraggled appearances.

Birdpaw purred at them, and rested her tail-tip on each kit's head before turning back to Moss. "Your kits seem very bright and clever! I'm sure they'll make great w-I mean, I'm sure they'll grow up to be strong and brave," she desperately hoped that Moss didn't catch that slip up.

The tortoiseshell queen didn't seem to notice it, much to Birdpaw's relief. "Thank you! I'm very proud of them," the queen mewed warmly, if not with a little motherly pride. Then, her gaze turning

slightly more serious, she lowered her voice, "Bird, I...never mind," she cut herself off abruptly with a shake of her head, "You friend is coming this way. Thank you again for your generosity...my kits and I will see you around sometime."

Birdpaw turned around, and saw that it was Hazelpaw. The brown she-cat looked horrid: her fur was messy, and her eyes held a glassy sheen to them. "Hazelpaw?" Birdpaw asked tentatively.

Her friend only gave the slightest nod in response as she padded up to Birdpaw. "Can I talk to you for a moment?" the brown she-cat asked hoarsely. It was obvious that something big was troubling her, and Birdpaw could guess what it was.

Birdpaw nodded, and bid Moss a quick goodbye before following Hazelpaw out of the camp, and into the forest where fewer ears could eavesdrop on them.

~~

Birdpaw was quiet as she followed Hazelpaw out, and the two she-cats padded side by side for a long while, without uttering a word. The atmosphere was slightly awkward and tense, but Birdpaw didn't want to break the silence.

After what seemed like forever, Hazelpaw finally stopped.

Or rather, collapsed.

Birdpaw rushed to help bring her friend back onto her paws, but Hazelpaw refused. She just lay there, slumped on the ground, for a few heartbeats before she finally hauled herself up to a sitting position. But even then, her head was down and her shoulders were slumped in defeat.

Birdpaw sighed, not knowing what she was supposed to do to comfort her friend. "I'm your friend....and I know that you brought me here for a reason. You can go ahead and tell me whatever you wanted to say."

A brief moment of silence fell upon the two she-cats, before Hazelpaw finally lifted her chin and murmured something

incoherently.

"Sorry, could you repeat that?" Birdpaw asked tentatively, not wanting to hurt Hazelpaw's feelings but it was true that she couldn't make out what her friend said.

Hazelpaw cleared her throat, and enunciated in a clear voice, "Kill me, Birdpaw."

"Wh-what?!" Birdpaw was stunned. "Why?"

"I know, it sounds stupid and completely ridiculous...but I-" Hazelpaw broke off with a growl of frustration, pressing her paws to her head.

Birdpaw placed her tail-tip on her friend's shoulder in sympathy, and mewed gently, "Go ahead and vent it all out...I'm here for you."

Hazelpaw took a deep breath, and when she finally spoke her voice was rather clear, albeit slightly trembling.

"Birdpaw, I am a medicine cat apprentice. You know what that means: I can't ever take a mate. My job is to serve my clan and make sure that every cat is healthy. But, as I'm sure that you and the other have noticed, through this journey I met and fell in love with Eagleflight, a strong and brave tom who was always there for me when I was afraid. Call it naive and selfish if you will, but I couldn't help it. I knew that our relationship was doomed one way or another, since we're bounded by the warrior code, but I just can't get over the fact that he sacrificed his own life to save me. I..." she trailed off, before pressing on with a fierce gaze in her eyes, "I know that I'll probably never meet another cat like him. He was my one and only, and even if we all survive this quest, I doubt that I'll have the courage to spend my entire life without him. Maybe...maybe if I went to Starclan, I'll see him again and I'll be happy."

By the time Hazelpaw finished, she was trembling all over. Birdpaw decided to hold her tongue for a bit, and just offered her friend warmth and silent company.

A moment passed before Hazelpaw turned to face Birdpaw with a

pained expression in her eyes and whispered, "Birdpaw, do you think that I am a coward for saying such stupid things?"

Birdpaw shook her head. "No, of course not! I understand that you're going through a lot of pain right now...and that you can't help your emotions. However, I think that you should keep on living."

"Why?"

"Because...because he saved you. He gave up his life for yours...and you don't want that to go to waste, right? Eagleflight wanted you to live. To grow up. To survive, save the clans, and become a great medicine cat that he could be proud to call his love."

"But what about the warrior code?"

Birdpaw hesitated, before meowing determinedly, "As much as it's breaking the warrior code, I believe that love itself isn't wrong. The reason that medicine cats weren't allowed to take mates was because their duty was to serve their clan. If you always put your clan before yourself, and not let your feelings interfere with your role, I think that everything will work itself out in the end."

Hazelpaw nodded slowly, a flicker of hope entering her previously empty eyes. "You're right. Thank you so much, Birdpaw. Without you, I probably would've gone off and done some foolish thing that would put me to shame for the rest of the time that my spirit is alive."

Birdpaw purred, and flicked her friend's flank with her tail playfully. "Of course! If I lost a cat who was extremely special to me, I wouldn't be afraid to come to you for help either."

"Speaking of which, Birdpaw, is there any cat that you're particularly interested in right now?" Hazelpaw asked curiously.

Birdpaw couldn't answer. "Um...uhh..." A cat that was super special to Birdpaw? Did friends count? Probably not. Hazelpaw was asking if Birdpaw had a crush on any cat.

"Come on, there's gotta be someone!" Hazelpaw urged, "For

example, is there a specific tom who comes to your mind whenever something dangerous happens? Are you always thinking about a particular cat and how he's doing?"

"Um, my father?" Birdpaw joked, but apparently it wasn't very funny since Hazelpaw didn't look too happy.

However, Hazelpaw's words did strike a chord somewhere within Birdpaw. Recently, a familiar ginger pelt had always been popping up at the back of her mind. *I wonder how he's doing...* she thought. A pang of hurt stabbed at her as she thought back to the conversation they had this afternoon.

"Fine. If you don't want to talk about it, I'll stop asking. But if there's anything you need, talk to me! I'll help you like you helped me today," Hazelpaw offered, and Birdpaw nodded gratefully.

By now, the sun was setting and it would only be a small while before its rays disappeared. "Come on, it's getting late. Let's head back to camp before Nightpelt worries about us." Birdpaw mewed, and Hazelpaw only had the time to give a small nod before the two she-cats took off in the direction of the camp, blissfully unaware of the pair of eyes that was intently watching them.

~~

Birdpaw's stomach was rumbling when she and Hazelpaw entered the camp. Normally, she would head straight to the fresh-kill pile, but this wasn't Shadeclan and there was no fresh-kill pile to be seen. Instead, the two young cats were faced with pained yowls, angry cries, and thin cats battling each other over pieces of prey.

Birdpaw just stood there blankly, absorbing in the new environment, until a cat prodded her roughly.

"Hey, you."

Whipping around, Birdpaw found herself staring Hawk in the face. It wasn't a good thing, since he was more than a bit taller than her. She gulped, unsure of what to do.

"You killed my brother last night." was all he said.

Birdpaw didn't even need to think back to last night to recall. "He was your brother?"

Hawk didn't even give a reply. Instead, he aimed a swipe at Birdpaw, who ducked out of sheer reflexes. If she didn't move, that blow could've knocked her unconscious right there. Instead, it left a stinging scratch on her left shoulder, reopening the wound from the previous fight.

Trying to ignore the searing pain, Birdpaw looked around frantically for someone to help. Hazelpaw was nowhere to be seen, and none of her friends were around. No other cat was paying attention to her, as they were too busy with their own struggles.

The golden tabby tom snarled at Birdpaw. "Today I will take revenge for Basil, who died at the paws of a weakling like you," he moved in closer, eyes glistening with thirst for blood as he continued, "I am the most powerful cat here...and soon I will be even stronger! With every cat I kill, my power grows, and today you will fuel my strength. I-"

"Stop!" a sharp voice rang out, and Hawk stopped in his tracks.

It was Moss, with Hazelpaw stumbling at her heels. The tortoiseshell's eyes were blazing with such a fury that even Birdpaw was stunned for a second, before she gained enough sense to bound over to the queen's side.

"...Moss? Why are you here?" Hawk asked, his voice significantly more gentle. He padded over slowly, reaching out to nuzzle her ear, but she swatted him away in annoyance.

"Hawk, you will not gain anyone's love or respect unless you can control your anger and desire to dominate everything." the queen meowed in such a cold tone that the tabby tom visibly flinched, before backing off slowly.

Hawk's eyes became clouded with a pained expression, much to Birdpaw's surprise. It didn't seem like that tom was capable of expressing anything except for a desire to kill. "But she killed my brother!" he protested.

"And you killed one of her best friends," Moss stated flatly.

"Moss..." Hawk sighed, "You still can't forget about that cat? After so many moons of being apart, why won't you move on? No tom is worth your grief, especially one that left you."

Moss's pelt bristled and her eyes flashed dangerously. "He didn't leave me!"

"Yeah right," the golden tabby snorted, before meowing, "I'll always be here for you though, Moss. Unlike him."

A trace of sadness crept into the queen's eyes as she murmured, "You'll never understand what it's like to love a cat, Hawk." She then turned to the two apprentices and beckoned to them with her tail, before padding away.

Birdpaw and Hazelpaw were quick to follow, not daring to look back.

~~

After they reached the place where Birdpaw first saw Moss, the tortoiseshell queen let out a small sigh of relief and greeted her kits as they came bounding up to her in their excitement, bragging about their games and findings. She must have said something to them though, because Cloud and Thorn quickly backed away to continue whatever they were doing before.

When Moss turned back to face the two she-cats, she suddenly looked very weary and tired, even more so than in the afternoon. "You have found yourselves faced with a dangerous enemy," she meowed with a sigh, "Bird, you were lucky that Hazel was clever enough to come find me. Otherwise, you might've been killed on the spot and no cat would care, or know who did it."

Birdpaw didn't know what to say. Turning to Hazelpaw, she reached out and touched her nose to her friend's for a second in thanks. Then, turning back to face both she-cats, she dipped her head and mewed, "Thank you so much for saving my life."

Moss shook her head. "It's not your fault, Bird. However, many cats

are suspicious of your group's sudden appearance. You must be careful, as there are ears listening everywhere. If you ever need anything, please feel free to find me, as my kits and I are forever grateful to you."

Birdpaw nodded, and replied, "Thank you for your advice, Moss, and I will be happy to guard your kits for you, or bring back a share of my prey for you if you ever need it."

"I'm not a skilled fighter or hunter, but I know a little bit about herbs, so if you or your kits ever catch a cough or have any discomforts, I'd be happy to help too!" Hazelpaw chimed in, "After all, you saved my best friend today."

Something in Moss's amber eyes softened for a moment, before she murmured, "Even though I don't know the two of you, you both are fine and young. Good luck to you in the future, Bird and Hazel."

~~

As Birdpaw fell asleep in her nest next to Hazelpaw's that night, she couldn't help but feel worried about the future. Hawk...Blaze...Moss...they were all unfamiliar and intriguing in their own ways, and it seemed like they all had their own secrets to keep. Blaze especially. He wasn't much older than Birdpaw, and already seemed to strong compared to her.

Was this what he meant by every cat for himself? That there is no sense of family among the Rogues?

There was one more question that tugged at Birdpaw's curiosity, even though it had nothing to do with her. Who was the cat that Moss and Hawk were arguing about? Was he the father of her kits? If so...then where was he now?

It took a long time for Birdpaw to finally succumb to sleep.

~~~~~~

I figured that I'd clear up a few misconceptions/questions that you guys might have.
~~~~~~

1. Blaze is around the age of Falconwing. I know you might think that he's like, Blacktail's age or something because I never specified how old he was AND he seemed pretty mature. Well, no. He's pretty young, lol. And yes, he is Birdpaw's current crush. However, there's a long way for the story to go, so there's a lot of plot twists coming up. :3

2. Birdpaw is going to remain an apprentice for a while. Even if she becomes old enough to be a warrior, she's not going to be one until at LEAST she gets back to the clans. Also...this book was solely dedicated to this quest to the Rogues. It wasn't meant to span Birdpaw's entire life. I wanted to write a sequel about her life, but now I'm deciding against it because it's too much for me. :/ I may publish a few one-shots about minor characters though, depending on who you want me to write about. :3

3. If you see in the Introductions, there is a she-cat called Night. Nightpelt's fake name is also Night. This was not a mixup of any sort.

I think that's about it for now. ^^; I'll hopefully see you all soon ;A; although that's fairly unlikely.

Thank you for staying with me for so long. I really really appreciate your love/support. Without you guys, I would've given up a long time ago to be honest. <3

Much love,

Rainii <3

Chapter 20.5 (short!)

If you've read the latest message on my board, you'll understand what's up with this ridiculously short chapter. (:

If situations were less urgent, I would post this a few days before I post a full chapter to reward you guys for being so patient with me. I guess that's not possible ;A; but think of this little bit as an apology cookie...apology because I take so long and cookie because they're small too.

Anyways, let's get to ittttt.

"Wake up!" a voice hissed urgently in Birdpaw's left ear.

"Hold on, I'll be right there..." she mumbled sleepily, shifting her position a little and waving her tail dismissively before settling down again to sleep more comfortably.

In her groggy state, Birdpaw thought she heard a faint snort of annoyance, before something soft and furry started waving itself in her face and Birdpaw felt just a little bit...

Achoo! she sneezed, before hauling herself up to a sitting position with an irritated shake of her pelt. "What's gotten into your fur? It's not even sunrise yet!" she growled at Falconclaw, who just sighed before giving her a dirty look. Hazelpaw was standing behind him, her thick pelt acquiring a silver sheen in the soft rays of moonlight that shone through the den entrance.

The tabby tom shook his head and brought his tail in front of Birdpaw's mouth, as if to silence her, before turning around and exiting the den without a single word of explanation. Hazelpaw beckoned to Birdpaw with her tail in the same strangely mysterious way, before making her way out as well.

Birdpaw sighed, and with one last, longing look at her comfortable nest, stumbled to her paws and followed suit.

~*~

"Is everyone here?" Nightpelt eyed the rest of the group warily, as if he suspected that a Rogue was nearby. Lifting his chin, the black warrior sniffed at the air carefully, before giving a slight nod and relaxing his almost defensive stance.

Falconclaw dipped his head respectfully to the senior warrior before meowing, "Yes Nightpelt. I made sure to stay quiet so that we wouldn't attract much attention."

Birdpaw, however, was thoroughly confused. "Can't we just meet in the daytime? I don't see much difference between now, which should be precious sleeptime, and tomorrow at sunhigh, when we'd all be more awake." She yawned, as if to emphasize her point.

Almost instantly, Birdpaw could feel Falconclaw's amber gaze boring into her. The tabby tom let out a small huff, before meowing, "All the Rogues are resting right now. Therefore, there is less of a chance for us to be discovered like this. If it was sunhigh, who knows how many ears are listening? Birdpaw, please mind your words."

Ouch. That last sentence probably held the most formal tone that the tabby's used with her in a while. Although he wasn't insulting her and he did have a valid point, Birdpaw felt hurt by his cold demeanor, and her ears flattened as she glared at the ground in silence.

Clearly feeling uncomfortable by the direction that this conversation was going into, Hazelpaw tried to change the subject. "Nightpelt, is there anything specific that you'd like to inform us about?" she asked.

"Yes," Nightpelt answered, and both Falconclaw and Birdpaw fixed their gazes on him in order to pay attention.

"Please listen carefully to my words, as we don't want, and quite frankly can't afford, another accident to occur among the lot of us. As you can see, there are still many members of the Rogues who do not trust us right now, and for rightful reasons. We're not going to

be able to discover any of their secrets if we don't gain their trust first. As a result, I want you to go out and socialize, pretending to be one of them. Use the friends you gain to your advantage and be on your guard if you happen to make any enemies," he gave Birdpaw a knowing look before continuing, "But no matter what you do, always remember to never ever get too close to a Rogue, as you never know who's going to turn their back on you in a single heartbeat."

Birdpaw felt her pelt start to prickle with worry, and not because Nightpelt somehow found out about, and indirectly made a reference to Hawk. Her gaze dropped to the floor again, and her mind was swimming with a mixture of conflict, guilt, and most of all, an unexplainable feeling of pain that seemed to stab at her when she least expected it.

"Any questions?" Nightpelt asked, and when no cat voiced his or her concerns, declared, "Then this meeting is over. We will meet here at every half and full moon to report on any new findings, and emergency meetings will also be held if needed be. You will be notified of this if you find a pinecone in your nest."

"We understand. Can we split up right now, though? So that if any of us get caught, we won't be seen all together and it would arouse less suspicion," Falconclaw suggested. The rest of the group murmured their approvals, and Birdpaw found herself nodding numbly.

As she turned to make her way back to camp alone, Birdpaw felt a sense of dread creeping up on her. Nightpelt's last words still echoed in her brain as she suppressed a sigh. *Blaze...can we still be together despite all the ties that restrain us?*

But another, more ominous thought nagged at Birdpaw from the back of her mind.

...Or *would not seeing you at all be a safer idea?*

~~

Okay, arguably not my best writing recently. However, I hope

you guys enjoyed it as this was a critical scene in the story.

I can't promise you when I'll update again, but I can promise to continue on the best I can. (: For example, since I don't have a lot of time to be writing, I'm now going back to slowly edit my previous chapters (wow I really did suck). I think I've told you all this before but if you're ever bored, you may go and reread from the beginning of this book, as you may find some unexpected changes (hopefully for the better)! For example, the very first section of the Prologue (indicated by ~~~~~~) should now be close to its final, polished form. :3

Anyways, best of luck to me, yes? :/

With a few sighs as to what the future holds,

Rainii

Chapter 21

Hey guys! Long time no see. :/ I know I promised that I'd update by Thanksgiving, but school has been hard on me. But this time I lived up to my word! (well at least over here it's 9 15 AM, December 25th. xP) This chapter is a wee bit shorter than the others, and I could've squished a few more scenes into this chapter, but I felt like you guys have been waiting for way too long and I wanted to reward you for your patience.

Listen to me ramble at the end. I suppose you're getting anxious to read ^^;

"What's wrong, Birdpaw? You seem quiet lately."

The soft mew belonged to Hazelpaw, whose eyes were clouded with worry. "Ever since that group meeting a few nights ago, you've been uncharacteristically down."

Birdpaw shook her head dismissively, before stopping to taste the air for any trace of prey hiding among the thick bushes. "No, nothing's wrong. I suppose I've just been thinking a lot."

"About...?" her friend urged.

"Everything, I guess." She sighed, disappointed that there didn't seem to be any mice nearby. Turning to face Hazelpaw, she gratefully touched her tail-tip to her friend's shoulder. "Don't worry about me, I'm fine."

However, the brown she-cat didn't seem to be convinced. "Are you sure?" Hazelpaw asked, before sighing, "Well, if there's anything you want to talk about, I'm always here for you."

Birdpaw let out a grateful purr, and swatted a paw at her best friend playfully. "Sure, I'll remember that next time I run into any trouble. I have to go now, but I'll catch up with you later!"

And with those cheerful words, Birdpaw turned and bounded away as fast as she could, before she even had a chance to rethink her decision.

~*~

Truth be told, Birdpaw didn't even know where she was heading. She just ran with all her might, away from Hazelpaw as well as her own doubts. She didn't lie to her friend, though; Birdpaw really had been trying to focus on what Nightpelt had instructed: to make friends with the Rogues and hopefully garner their trust.

She had grown fairly close to Moss and her kits over the past moon, and although the tortoiseshell had told her nothing "useful", Birdpaw was genuinely grateful that she at least had friends within this strange group of cats.

Birdpaw had also gotten to know a few other members of the Rogues, although they were not particularly friendly. For example, there was this one she-cat named Night who seemed to despise her for no reason at all, and her ice-blue gaze always sent chills down Birdpaw's spine whenever the two crossed paths.

The other clan cats seemed to have blended in with the Rogues more successfully than she, though. Falconclaw and Nightpelt were fairly popular, and Falconclaw even had a few she-cats gossiping about his reserved, almost cold demeanor. "If only they knew how hot-headed he really was," Birdpaw muttered to herself. Hazelpaw had quite a few friends too, although that really wasn't a surprise since she was naturally so kind to others.

Birdpaw suddenly felt a twinge of jealousy toward her companions. Maybe if she didn't have such a big mouth and rotten temper, she could make friends too.

Just then, the sound of leaves cracking made Birdpaw look up in alarm. There were pawsteps coming her way! Luckily, she had taken precautions to disguise her scent among the ferns every single time she ventured outside camp. however, Birdpaw was still anxious to hide from whoever this was. Knowing there wasn't a better option, she dove for a nearby juniper bush and crouched

there as quietly as she could, waiting for the cats to reveal themselves. Unsheathing her claws, she also prepared to defend herself if needed be.

But there was no need, as it was Nightpelt who stepped out from the ferns. Birdpaw felt herself relax slightly. However, her eyes narrowed when she saw that Night was alongside him. She wondered why they were here. Perhaps they needed to talk about something in private? In that case, this would be a terrible place to be in. Birdpaw couldn't run away without making noise, and she couldn't tune them out because of the close proximity. As a result, she could only stay rooted to her spot, almost frozen as she watched the conversation unfold.

Night bared her teeth at Nightpelt. "So tell me, why are you here?"

Birdpaw was dumbfounded. *They know each other?*

The black warrior's gaze was cool and betrayed no sign of emotion as he meowed, "Exactly as my companions and I had told Greenfur. Are you doubting us?"

"Stop pretending! You know perfectly well who I am, don't you? So why are you hiding this from me?" the she cat sounded a bit hurt for a heartbeat, but that tone quickly disappeared as her ears flattened and her eyes narrowed into slits.

Nightpelt appeared confused now. "I'm sorry, but I don't recognize you."

The she cat lunged at him, claws unsheathed and eyes blazing with fury. Nightpelt neatly sidestepped before tripping her and flipping her over, pinning her down. To be honest, the two looked so similar that Birdpaw could hardly tell who was who, and the only thing that gave things away were the colors of their eyes. Nightpelts' were as green as the depths of the forest, whereas Night's were an icy blue.

"Can we please talk things out? Ever since you first laid eyes on me you've been hating me, and I don't understand why." Nightpelt hissed at her, struggling to maintain his hold on her as she writhed

underneath his grasp.

But eventually, Night stopped fighting back. Her voice turned cold, emotionless rather, as she meowed, "Let me up."

The black warrior did, and she hastily got to her paws, giving her ruffled pelt a shake. But what came next out of Night's mouth shocked Birdpaw, even though she already kind of suspected that something was going on.

"Do you remember Iris?" It was a simple question, but Nightpelt's reaction showed otherwise. He staggered back a step, pelt bristling.

So the black she cat continued. "So yes, you do remember her. I suppose that you don't know what happened to her, do you?"

"...No."

"She was taken away by the Twolegs. She was sick, and I was too young to know any better, but if I did I would've kept them away from her. Because after they took her away, she never came back." A trace of bitterness crept back into the she cat's voice as she closed her eyes and drew a shallow breath before continuing, "So I ran away, because that's all that I could've done. I ran away from those monsters, those fences, and my own memories. I also swore to find whoever my father was, because it was his fault that he wasn't there to protect us when we needed him most." Night's eyes opened, but all hatred was replaced by grief.

Nightpelt was silent for a while before he quietly asked, "So how did you know that it was me?"

"Because my mother named me after you. And you betrayed her." The last sentence still bore the hint of a snarl, but the black she-cat no longer seemed half as hostile. Rather, she seemed quite small and defenseless compared to her father.

Another moment of silence passed before Nightpelt meowed, "Go ahead."

Night looked confused for a second. "What?"

"Go ahead and make your move. You said you wanted revenge, didn't you?"

"Well..." she trailed off, and shuffled her paws nervously, eyes darting about as if she were torn. Nightpelt took a step closer to her, and she backed away, ears flattened. "...We'll settle this later!" she quickly whipped around and fled.

Nightpelt remained where he stood, almost like a statue, for a long while. So long that when he meowed Birdpaw's name, she almost didn't recognize it.

And then it hit her.

Birdpaw stepped out from the bushes sheepishly, shaking the leaves from her pelt. "I'm really sorry," she mumbled.

She expected him to turn around and glare at her. Or scold her. Or even cuff her around the head with a paw. But he did none of those actions. He didn't even turn around. Birdpaw felt worse than if he had given her a punishment, though, because she deserved all the scolding in the world for listening in.

Another long moment passed before Nightpelt finally turned to face her, although his expression masked his emotions. "Do you want to take a walk?" he meowed quietly, even though it didn't seem like a question.

"Um...sorry, what?" Birdpaw was bewildered.

"Since you already know some of my story, I suppose it wouldn't do any harm to tell you the rest of it. You don't have to listen, though."

Birdpaw looked down, and asked, "Would you trust me, a mere apprentice, with your life story?"

He shrugged. "You may be naive and clumsy, but I believe that you're trustworthy. Plus, I wouldn't want to leave only half of the story in your mind, becaues it would likely give you the wrong impression of me. So are you coming or not?"

Birdpaw nodded.

~*~

"I was young and rather foolish when I first met Iris," Nightpelt frowned, eyes staring blankly straight ahead. "My fellow clanmate and I were venturing outside our territory, near Twolegplace. We found her being chased by a dog, and she somehow clawed her way up a tree and got stuck. My clanmate distracted the dog, while I climbed up to help her get down."

Birdpaw flicked her ears to show that she was listening, but didn't want to interrupt the story.

"She was a kittypet who was bold enough to explore outside her, what do you call it? Yard? And seemed really excited about the prospect of meeting a clan cat like me. She was genuinely curious about us, which was somewhat surprising because all the kittypets I knew were spoiled rotten and rather condescending of us. So we started meeting secretly, and fell in love."

Nightpelt paused here, and Birdpaw looked towards him with a frown. He was probably about to get to the bad part.

Her prediction was right. "But when I tried to convince her to become a clancat, she adamantly refused, claiming that her Twolegs would be devastated without her around. We argued for a long time over the issue, but she assured me that everything was going to be fine, and that we could still meet regularly like we always had. I was foolish enough to believe her." The last sentence came out with more bitterness than Birdpaw expected. She winced, knowing the depth of pain that was reflected in his words.

"So..."

"So we continued to meet like we always did, until one night she just stopped showing up. I tried looking for her, but was never able to find her. I was angry and confused, and resolved never to meet her again. It was only much later on when I found out that she didn't stop meeting me out of free will, but because her Twolegs forcibly kept her inside, presumably due to her pregnancy. Had I known sooner, I would've found a way in."

Birdpaw didn't know what to say. She wanted to comfort him, but there was nothing that she could really do to help. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"It's all right, I got what I rightfully deserved anyways. It was my fault for not thinking things through and just jumping to conclusions. I shouldn't have doubted Iris. Night has every right to hate me." Nightpelt's voice became calm again, but Birdpaw could still sense waves of sorrow and regret coming off of him.

"I don't think she hates you, though." Birdpaw mewed, suddenly stopping in her tracks.

Nightpelt cast her a confused look, and scoffed, "Stop being so optimistic. You saw how she acted towards me today."

"I did, and I don't think she hates you. If she truly wanted revenge, she would've fought tooth and nail to bring you to your end. But she didn't. She ran away," Birdpaw observed, thinking back to the events from that afternoon.

The black warrior seemed to think about it for a few heartbeats, before nodding slowly. "You have a point. So you're saying that she ran away because she was hesitant about what she wanted?"

Birdpaw nodded. "I'm not entirely sure, but that's the most logical explanation I can provide."

"So are you suggesting that I should attempt to talk to her, and see if she's willing to change her mind about me?"

"Um, I'm not a good cat to ask about these things at all!" Birdpaw blurted, realizing that if she wasn't careful, she'd be giving him false hope. "...but I think it's worth a shot."

~*~

It was almost nightfall, and Birdpaw and Nightpelt were on their way back to camp. They padded together in silence, each cat lost in his own thoughts, until a sudden noise startled the two of them.

As they crept closer to the source of the sound, a few voices became

audible. Birdpaw's ears flattened, and her heart started to pound as the voices drew closer. She and Nightpelt quickly crawled under a nearby bush, hoping not to be discovered.

It was Clawface and two other unfamiliar cats, presumably Rogues. They were whispering amongst each other, and Birdpaw strained to listen in on their conversation.

"Is it wise to go tonight?" one of the two other cats, a white she-cat, hissed.

"We're in need of prey, so it's not like we have another choice," Clawface whispered back, "Now let's hurry, since tonight is full moon and they will likely be away from..."

They were now too far away to be heard. However, Birdpaw caught enough of the dialogue to realize that this must be a hunting patrol. *But why hunt this late? And who's "they"?*

Once the group of three was safely out of earshot, Birdpaw echoed her concerns to Nightpelt, who simply shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure what's going on, but something doesn't seem right to me."

"Should we follow them?"

"Let's go."

~*~

It was a long trek, and by the time the patrol stopped, it was almost moonhigh, and they were at the banks of a river.

No, not a river. The river.

They were back in clan territory.

Birdpaw and Nightpelt watched silently from a distance away as the three cats slunk down to the shores, and crouched, as if waiting for something. Suddenly, Birdpaw saw a flash of silver, the quick strike of a paw, and the excited gleam in the white she-cat's eyes as she scooped up the fish and set it carefully down beside her.

"What do they think they're doing?" Nightpelt's eyes were narrowed to slits, and his pelt was bristling.

Birdpaw was now equally agitated. "So the clans were not responsible for stealing prey from each other....the Rogues were behind this all along! What do we do, Nightpelt? Should we stop them?"

The warrior shook his head regretfully. "No, not unless we want to give away our identities."

"So we're just going to sit and watch as they steal all of the prey from our forest and let our clanmates starve?"

But Nightpelt never got a chance to answer.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing on Iceclan territory?" a voice demanded, and all three Rogues snapped up their heads at once on its source, whom Birdpaw recognized as Goldpaw. Her mentor, Brackentail stood behind her, eyes blazing with fury.

The Rogues had run right into a night patrol.

The three of them sprang back into defensive positions, claws unsheathed. It looked like a skirmish was about to occur at any time now, if no cat did anything about it.

Birdpaw gave Nightpelt a torn look. She knew that if they went to defend the Rogues and had a good enough backstory to explain why they were here in the middle of the night, it was a great opportunity to prove their loyalty and garner more trust from Greenfur. However, doing so would be against the will of her every limb and bone, and she sensed that Nightpelt felt the same.

"Don't worry, they're outnumbered," Clawface sneered at the Iceclan cats.

"So what do we do?" the third cat of the patrol, a silver tabby, meowed, teeth bared in a snarl.

Brackentail whispered something to Goldpaw, who vigorously shook her head. He looked frustrated, but nodded grudgingly. The

two exchanged a few more words, before Brackentail stepped forward and meowed evenly, "If you choose to leave our territory and the fish you caught, we will not pursue you."

"And what if we don't want to leave?" the white she-cat growled menacingly.

"Snow-" Clawface's voice was cut off as the she-cat flung herself at the Iceclan cats with a screech of fury. He and the silver tabby then raced after her, throwing themselves into the battle.

Birdpaw was frozen with terror. What were they going to do now? Iceclan was outnumbered by one, but this could be a fate-changing opportunity. She dug her claws into the ground in frustration, hoping that an idea could suddenly occur to her. Birdpaw remembered Eagleflight's death, and what she could've done to prevent it. A bitter taste rose in her throat, and Birdpaw knew that if she wanted to do something, she had to think fast. Because at a time like this, even a fraction of a heartbeat could be enough to save somecat's life.

~*~

Unknown's POV

Honestly, he felt so torn and confused over everything. He knew that he was on a mission, but for the good of what? This wasn't the first time that he questioned his priorities.

And it all began when he met her. The one fateful encounter, leading to the next, and the next. He knew that unlike all the others, who fought over his attention like a mob of rats diving for the same carcass, the affection and friendship that she had for him was real.

She never questioned him. Never thought of him as an object of glory. Never loved him for how respected he was within the group or how much prey he could catch in a day. She respected him for who he was, and that was that.

He felt a need to protect her, but before all of his desires came his

duty, which always had to be his first priority. Why? He wasn't sure either.

The amount of influence that she had over him seemed ridiculous at times, and he felt both guilty and frustrated over this weakness. However, he still didn't ever regret meeting her. Didn't regret a single one of their meetings. What he did regret were their circumstances. The fact that no matter how much he wanted to change things for them, he couldn't.

~~~~~~

All right! I think it should be kind of obvious who the Unknown is, but let's hear your guesses anyways! Right now one thing's for certain — he's a tom. LOL.

So I'm planning to make the story move a lot more faster in the upcoming chapters. Stuff will grow more complicated, and more characters will get some of their pasts revealed.

But I haven't forgotten about our FalconxBird and BlazexBird shippers. O3O Hopefully we'll be seeing more on that in the next chapter.

All right, hopefully you enjoyed this. c: Merry Christmas, everyone!

~Rain
~~~~~~

Chapter 22

WOW SURPRISE SURPRISE GUYSSSS <3 LOOK IT'S WHAT EVERYONE'S BEEN BUGGING ME FOR :') CHAPTER 22 :'D

I'll ramble at the end. c:

~~~~~~

There was no time to waste.

Birdpaw was getting ready to dive into the action to help Goldpaw
~~~~~~

and Brackentail -- before she felt the slight pressure of Nightpelt's tail-tip on her shoulder. *But why? They're your clanmates and my friends!* She threw him a puzzled glance, but the black warrior just shook his head gravely. Birdpaw reluctantly sat back down, feeling both confused that Nightpelt wanted them to just stand by and guilty for not being able to do anything to help.

Just then, Birdpaw scented something in the air. *Iceclan!* She swiveled around to see three lithe shapes a small distance away, their silhouettes pale against the moonlight. They must've been another night border patrol. The shapes grew steadily larger, and Birdpaw recognized the cream she-cat who was at the head of the trio as Iceclan's deputy.

"What are you doing here, spying on us?" she spat accusingly.

At Birdpaw.

"Wait, I'm not-"

"Daisyfur, it's us," Nightpelt, who had now turned to face the patrol, interrupted before the she-cat could launch herself at Birdpaw. His green eyes were flooded with warmth and relief as he added, "It's me."

The cream she-cat took a step back in surprise. "What? But Nightpelt-"

"We'll explain the situation later, " the black tom lowered his voice, "Goldpaw and Brackentail need help right now." he gestured towards the pair who were still grappling with the Rogues in the dust. Goldpaw's ear was bleeding, but fortunately she and Brackentail seemed free of serious injuries. However, both Iceclan cats seemed worn out from being outnumbered.

Daisyfur gave a brisk nod, understanding the situation, before she and her patrol rushed down the hill to help their clanmates with a shrill battle cry. The Rogues seemed taken aback at the sudden appearance of reinforcements, and Birdpaw heard the silver tabby curse loudly.

Since it was now five against three, it was clear that Iceclan was going to overpower the Rogues. "You may be victorious now, but this battle isn't over yet!" Clawface spat as he broke free from Brackentail's grasp. He and the other two Rogues then quickly turned tail and fled, disappearing into the shadowed trees. The Iceclan cats made no move to follow, instead crowded around their two clanmates to check if they were seriously injured.

Sensing that it was now safe to come out of her hiding place, Birdpaw sprang to her paws and rushed over to Goldpaw, eyes shining. "Wow, Goldpaw! You fought amazingly well!"

"Birdpaw? Is it really you?" the ginger she-cat stared at Birdpaw incredulously. "Where did you come from?"

Birdpaw nodded sheepishly, unsure of what to say. There was so much that had happened, but somehow it didn't feel right to open up at the moment. She wasn't ready.

Goldpaw must have sensed Birdpaw's reluctance, because she did not ask any further questions. Instead, the two apprentices turned their attention towards Nightpelt, who was now conversing with the rest of the Iceclan patrol.

"Are you all safe? Were you able to find out anything?" Daisyfur's eyes were dark with worry. "We were so worried about you!"

Nightpelt shook his head. "This isn't the right place to talk. There is much that I must report to Velvetstar, but it is far too important and dangerous to reveal out in the open like this."

The cream she-cat simply touched her nose to Nightpelt's cheek, before turning around and meowing to the rest of the cats, "Let's head back."

~*~

Birdpaw knew that now wasn't really the time to be thinking of such things, but she was still really curious, if not baffled by Nightpelt's history. Why was Daisyfur so openly affectionate with him? She thought Night's mother had already passed away.

Unable to resist the urge to ask questions, Birdpaw nudged Goldpaw flank lightly as they padded along side-by-side. "Daisyfur and Nightpelt...are they..."

"No!" Goldpaw's eyes bugged out in digust as she suddenly stopped in her tracks. She must have said that too loudly, though, as everyone else also stopped to look at her.

"Is something wrong?" Brackentail asked.

Goldpaw's pelt ruffled from embarrassment as she quickly shook her head. "No, no. Everything's fine."

Birdpaw tried to suppress a snort of amusement. They were so alike! She understood Goldpaw's embarrassment perfectly, having experienced it first-hand on several occasions.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, Goldpaw lowered her voice and whispered, "No, they're not mates if that's what you're asking. Nightpelt is Daisyfur's brother, so they've always been the best of friends."

Ohhh. Everything made sense now. Birdpaw felt slightly embarrassed for jumping to conclusions, but fortunately Goldpaw didn't seem to question it. They padded onwards quietly, although this time Birdpaw was glad that even though in the past few moons she had been constantly surrounded by cats, this time she no longer felt alone.

~*~

As the Iceclan camp came into view, Birdpaw couldn't help but compare it to the camp of her own clan. For starters, Iceclan's camp was much less sheltered. They were close to the river, and surrounded by tall reeds and grasses. Shadeclan had more trees and brambles that served as protection from possible intruders.

A warrior who was stationed at the camp's entrance, a small empty patch of land where the grasses were cleared away, nodded to Daisyfur and everyone else as they approached. However, as soon as he saw Birdpaw, his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Who's this? A

prisoner?" the tom's ears flattened as he growled.

"No, Birdpaw is one of my travel companions. There is no need to be aggressive with her," Nightpelt explained, and the tom dipped his head respectfully as he stepped aside to let everyone pass.

There were barely any cats in sight. Mewling came from a den on the far right, which Birdpaw assumed was the Nursery. *They must be so starved...* Birdpaw's heart sank as she thought about all the queens, kits, and elders who must be suffering from the lack of prey. *I wonder if Fernpelt is doing all right?*

Birdpaw really, really wanted to go home. She missed her friends, her mentor, and her old life in general. She didn't want to be responsible for the futures of her clanmates. *How could I? I'm just an apprentice.* All of a sudden, Birdpaw felt small and helpless. She pressed even closer to Goldpaw, who cast her a look of confusion but did not move away.

It seemed like moons passed before Velvetstar emerged from her den. Birdpaw was shocked at how fast things changed since they left. The leader, who seemed full of energy at the last Gathering Birdpaw had attended, now looked just as gaunt as the rest of her clan. However, Birdpaw still somehow felt encouraged, if not inspired by the blue fire that still seemed to burn in Velvetstar's eyes.

"Nightpelt, Birdpaw," the she-cat greeted them with a nod, "Welcome back to clan territory."

"Thank you, Velvetstar," the senior warrior responded with a respectful dip of the head, "I assume that there is much you would like to discuss with us?"

The leader's gaze softened slightly as she flicked her tail in the direction of her den, "You are correct. If I may keep you for just a moment, let us converse privately."

"Of course."

~*~

Velvetstar's den, located in the hollow of an oak tree, was surprisingly large and comfortable. The moss bedding was fresh and felt springy underneath the paw. *Wow, I wish the apprentices' den was like this!* Birdpaw thought to herself.

The blue-grey she-cat gestured for Nightpelt and Birdpaw to sit, before settling down herself, tail curled over her paws neatly. The two obeyed, but neither uttered a word. Birdpaw suspected that Nightpelt wanted Velvetstar to speak first.

"I understand that you are not here to stay, so I will not probe you for details. But before you recount your experiences, please answer one question -- is it confirmed that the prey-stealers are these rogue cats, and not other clans?"

"Yes." Nightpelt's eyes were dark with a mixture of emotions.

"Very well," the leader nodded slowly, before exhaling as if relieved, "You may begin."

Nightpelt spoke for most of the time, while Birdpaw filled in important details that the warrior may have skipped over. They mentioned Eagleflight's sacrifice, as well as Clawface's suspicion towards them. Nightpelt did his best to keep the summary brief as to save time. Dawn was fast approaching, and they needed to return to the Rogues' camp before anyone grew wary.

When they were finished, Birdpaw couldn't help but notice that the atmosphere in the den had become much more grim. The Iceclan leader's expression was unreadable, which unsettled Birdpaw.

The den was silent for a moment, before Velvetstar finally broke the silence. "Even though he is not from Iceclan, I pray that Eagleflight walks freely with our warrior ancestors up in Starclan. Any clan cat is considered a brave warrior in my eyes if he was willing to sacrifice his life for another."

Birdpaw nodded in agreement, while Nightpelt asked, "So now that our suspicions are confirmed, is there anything in particular that

you would like us to do when we return?"

The she-cat shook her head gravely. "Neither Petalwing nor I have heard anything from Starclan, and since you are the destined ones on the journey, I will leave things up to your discretion."

"Very well."

Birdpaw sensed that out of sheer formality and perhaps the desire to be home, Nightpelt was reluctant to ask to leave. Fortunately (or unfortunately) she had neither of these problems, so she cleared her throat awkwardly and asked, "Velvetstar, may we leave? The night is ending soon and we must get back before our absence is noticed."

Nightpelt turned sharply to look at Birdpaw, who almost immediately shrank back into her pelt. But she shouldn't have had a reason to be afraid -- after all, what she was asking for was reasonable.

"Ah, yes," Velvetstar meowed as she rose to her paws, "You are correct. I will let the other clan leaders know of your brief return, and please come back again if there is anything to report."

"Take care," Nightpelt mewed, dipping his head and retreating from the den. Birdpaw turned to follow, but Velvetstar stopped her with her tail-tip. Startled, Birdpaw looked back at the leader, hoping that she was not in trouble.

"Forgive me for saying this suddenly, but you remind me of my daughters in many ways. Good luck on your journey, Birdpaw. I have heard much about you." the blue-gray she-cat murmured, before lifting her tail from the apprentice's shoulder.

Birdpaw did not know what to say. *It must be a compliment!* ...But she could not bring herself to be happy seeing that for some reason, Velvetstar looked so forlorn when she made the comment. In the end, Birdpaw could only muster a small nod and a "thank you" before she slowly backed out of the leader's den where Goldpaw was waiting.

~*~

"Nightpelt had someone he needed to talk to, so he asked me to wait for you here instead," Goldpaw mewed lightly. She looked annoyed, though, for some reason, and her tail waved back and forth rather restlessly as if she was anxious to leave. Birdpaw was about to ask her what was wrong, but the ginger she-cat ended up speaking first.

"So I see you've been speaking to my mother," she meowed, not without hostility in her voice. Birdpaw was taken aback. *Her mother? As in....*

"Your mother is Velvetstar?"

Goldpaw flinched when the Iceclan leader's name was mentioned. "Yeah..." she muttered darkly, "mother."

"What's wrong?" Birdpaw glanced back at Velvetstar's den entrance, before lowering her voice, "Sorry, I guess I shouldn't have mentioned it within earshot."

"It's okay," Goldpaw heaved a sigh, "Let's talk about it in the apprentices' den."

~*~

"She's my birth mother, but I've never thought of her that way because as far as I can remember, she's never been there. Hazelpaw and I were raised by a queen named Iceflower, who now walks with Starclan," Goldpaw's voice was carefully controlled, but Birdpaw could tell that the ginger she-cat was trying very hard to suppress her emotions. However, before Birdpaw could say anything, Goldpaw continued on almost as if the brown she-cat wasn't even there. "She never paid any attention to us. To her, the clan always came first. I mean, I understand, but she has literally never addressed us as her kits. She feels so cold and so distant, and I wonder what Hazelpaw and I ever did to make her neglect us like this--I don't, I don't know."

"I think she's very proud of you, though," Birdpaw murmured, not knowing what else to say.

Goldpaw snorted at that statement, before meowing bitterly, "The only thing she's proud of is her clan. I'm pretty sure she doesn't even know what Hazelpaw's favorite herb is."

"That's not true! I know that she secretly cares for you and Hazelpaw a lot because her eyes shined so brightly when she mentioned you two to me. I've only seen that kind of look come from parents who are incredibly proud of their kits." Birdpaw protested, "I know that it hurts a lot to be neglected; my father barely has time for me because he's always so busy helping Hailstar. But I know that despite his work, he still loves me, so I'm sure Velvetstar has her own reasons for doing what she did!"

"Whatever," the ginger apprentice muttered, before springing to her paws. "Hey, Nightpelt's back!"

Nightpelt had poked his head into the apprentices' den, and upon meeting the two young she-cats' eyes, meowed, "Come on."

Birdpaw stood without a word, shaking the loose bits of moss from her pelt.

~*~

"Are we leaving now?" she was almost too afraid to ask.

To her dismay but not surprise, the black tom nodded. "It's almost dawn, so cats will be waking up soon. We should head back as quickly as we can, and think up a good story for when Clawface decides to interrogate us about where we've been."

"All right," Birdpaw murmured in agreement as Nightpelt started to pad towards the camp entrance. She was about to follow, but fear gripped her tightly and she couldn't help but turn to look back at her friend. "Goldpaw, I..."

"This is no time to be weak, Birdpaw!" Goldpaw growled, cutting her off. Birdpaw took a step away from her, startled. Seeing Birdpaw's expression, the she-cat's gaze softened, and she mewed,

"Look. We're young and inexperienced, but that shouldn't be something that hinders us. You will do your part on your quest to save our clans, and I will do my part right here, defending the clan that I love. So let's both do our best, and promise me you'll come back safe, okay?"

"Goldpaw..." Birdpaw was at a loss for words. She took a few more steps back, her chest suddenly feeling tight. The brown she-cat closed her eyes and exhaled, but when she reopened them, the fear suddenly seemed to melt away. Birdpaw nodded determinedly, before rushing forward to touch noses with Goldpaw before sharply turning around and racing after Nightpelt, who was waiting for her at the entrance.

~*~

"So Nightpelt, what do you think we should say? We're getting close to camp." Birdpaw had a whole list of possible ideas for a cover story, but so far Nightpelt had rejected all of them. It was somewhat disconcerting, but hey, they were just ideas. Birdpaw had to admit, though, that a few of them were pretty mouse-brained.

"I think the best thing to do, whatever we say, is to keep things simple," Nightpelt replied as they slowed to a walk.

Keep things simple...

"How about you pretend you had a quarrel with a cat, and wanted to ask me for advice, since I'm older?" Nightpelt asked.

"Isn't that a bit too easy?" Birdpaw was slightly skeptical.

"Well, no. It would make sense for it to be night, because if something's troubling you a lot, you wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Plus, we can just pretend that it was a very big argument, so big that we ended up talking until dawn. No cat knows when exactly we left camp, so if we're careful, we should be safe."

Birdpaw frowned, before she scented something in the air and stopped abruptly. "Wait!" she hissed. She spotted a mouse with its back to them a small distance away, too busy eating something to

sense the two cats. Birdpaw instinctively dropped into a crouch, and slowly crept up to it. *Don't mess up...don't mess up...*

Finally, she was close enough to pounce. Birdpaw sprang forward with a big leap, claws unsheathed, just as the mouse dropped its acorn and attempted to flee. However, it was just a heartbeat too late, and Birdpaw's claws closed around the mouse's neck.

Picking up the dead prey with her jaws and carrying it back to Nightpelt, she laid it down at her paws to briefly explain, "In case they ask what we were doing for the rest of the night."

"Good idea, Birdpaw! Nice catch, too." Nightpelt's words made Birdpaw's heart swell with pride for a few heartbeats, before a voice sliced through her thoughts, destroying any confidence she had in herself and their plan.

"Hey! What are you two doing out so early?" the voice belonged to a small grey tom who was only a little larger than Birdpaw. However, judging from the number of scars on his wiry body, he seemed to be a well-seasoned fighter.

Birdpaw stiffened, and the tom, sensing her nervousness, pressed on, "Are you two planning something suspicious?"

"What makes you think that? Bird couldn't sleep last night because of an argument with a friend, so the two of us took a walk. Then, when dawn came, we decided to hunt for a little while before returning to camp. Any problem?" Nightpelt lied smoothly, his green eyes betraying nothing.

But to their surprise, the grey tom snorted. "Jeez, why does everyone have to take things so seriously around here? Haven't you two got a sense of humor?" he rolled his eyes and, before either Birdpaw or Nightpelt could give a response, continued, "Anyways, I was just sent out here by Clawface to inform all Rogues out on patrol or whatnot to return to the camp immediately. Apparently there's news or something, so you two better hurry up. Oh and by the way, I'm Soot. See you around!"

Birdpaw gazed after the tom's retreating form, dumbfounded. Aside

from Moss and Blaze, this "Soot" was probably the first friendly Rogue she's met ever since she came here.

"Come on, Birdpaw. Let's go see what's going on," Nightpelt's voice brought Birdpaw back to attention. While she was distracted, the black tom had already walked a few steps ahead of her, and was waiting for her to catch up. Feeling slightly embarrassed again, Birdpaw scrambled after the older warrior.

"Sorry, I'm coming!"

~*~

When they entered the camp, Birdpaw was amazed at how many cats had gathered together for the meeting. There were way more unfamiliar faces than she had originally expected. She wondered where these cats were during the day, since she never saw them around camp.

She and Nightpelt quietly slipped into the crowd, and luckily no cat paid enough attention to notice them. Birdpaw looked around for Hazelpaw and Falconclaw, but the cats were disorganized and the entire atmosphere was so chaotic that she could not find them. Instead, Birdpaw tried to stick as close to Nightpelt as she could.

Suddenly, the noise died down, and Birdpaw looked up just in time to see Greenfur appear above them all, looking almost just like Hailstar whenever he called a clan meeting. The only difference was the gaze in their eyes; while Hailstar always looked down kindly at the Shadeclan cats, Greenfur's gaze was cold and almost condescending.

"Good morning, everyone. I hope you are all doing well," the she-cat meowed to the Rogues. While her words were gentle, her tone was anything but that. Birdpaw fought back the urge to shrink away.

"So what are we here for?" a cat yowled from the back. Everyone turned to look, but could not locate the source of the voice.

Greenfur flicked her tail dismissively. "I was just getting to that, and in the future I'd appreciate more politeness from my Rogues. Yes?"

her eyes flashed dangerously for a second, and no cat dared to answer her. Satisfied with the crowd response, the leader continued, "I have called you all today to make an important announcement regarding our well-being and the Rogues' survival. This information is to be kept strictly confidential, and I will trust in you that there is not a traitor in our midst who would leak this information to any outsider."

"Yes, Greenfur," all of the Rogues immediately responded in unison. Birdpaw looked around, confused, and hoped that no one caught the fact that she forgot to join in. Usually during Hailstar's clan meetings, the cats were allowed to speak whenever they wished, as long as they remained tactful. He never required the entire clan to respond in this way either. This made Birdpaw feel uncomfortable.

~*~

After Greenfur dismissed the crowd, cats got up and returned to their usual duties. Birdpaw rose to her paws, but suddenly realized that she couldn't find any of her friends. *Where had they all gone?* She felt an inkling of nervousness creep up her spine. She jumped when she felt a tail touch her shoulder.

"Hey," it was Blaze. The nervousness grew and Birdpaw's heart started to beat faster. What did the tom want?

"What is it?" she finally asked.

The ginger tom looked around, as if on watch for eavesdropping ears, before hissing in her ear, "There's something that I want to talk to you about. Come with me."

"O-okay."

The two of them quietly slipped away from camp, with Blaze in the lead. Birdpaw was pretty much stumbling after him, because she was so worried about what he wanted to speak to her about. Did he want to accuse her of being a spy for the clans? But if so, she would've been kicked out, if not killed, moons ago. The entire situation just wasn't adding up.

"Oof!" Birdpaw sprang back when she suddenly crashed into Blaze's flank, as he had suddenly stopped. They weren't too far away from camp, but the small clearing was secluded enough that it seemed safe to talk. "Sorry," she muttered, rubbing her nose with a paw.

Blaze seemed to ignore her accidental bump. Turning slightly to face Birdpaw directly, he meowed, "Birdpaw, why are you and your friends here?"

The brown she-cat winced. "Umm...we..."

"Be honest." It was only two words, but Birdpaw could feel the almost pleading tone in Blaze's voice.

"How can I trust you?" Birdpaw finally mustered the courage to ask. She looked up at Blaze, trying to decipher his expression.

The ginger tom's gaze revealed nothing, however. "I promise, if you tell me now, you can trust me." he said simply.

Birdpaw felt torn again. Should she tell him? If she did, she was putting her entire group, as well as the three clans, at risk.

"Don't tell him, Birdpaw! He's a Rogue and a traitor," someone growled from behind Birdpaw. Blaze's eyes snapped up, and his ears flattened against his head.

It was Falconclaw. He must have followed her from camp. The tabby tom took a few steps forward so that he was standing by Birdpaw's side. The two toms glared at each other for a while more, before Blaze flicked his tail dismissively and meowed, "Don't forget, Birdpaw." He then turned and stalked off without a second glance back.

"Don't forget what?" Falconclaw asked Birdpaw, who simply shook her head. She didn't know what Blaze was talking about either. Suddenly, Birdpaw felt her legs buckle under her, and Falconclaw had to support her with his shoulder in order to keep her standing. "Easy there. Come on, you look like you need to sleep."

Birdpaw, realizing that she had pretty much ran around all night long, felt tired. Really, really tired. She could only nod as

Falconclaw half-supported, half-dragged her back to camp. Through all her drowsiness, Birdpaw suddenly remembered why Blaze told her not to "forget".

The next night was half-moon.

~~~~~~

Ohmygosh. Guys. I actually finished it. I ACTUALLY FINISHED IT GUYS. SEVEN MONTHS SEVEN MONTHS MAN. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW HORRIBLE THAT WAS.

Just kidding. But I will admit, it was really difficult to squeeze time out for this.

I'm proud to say that this has been the longest chapter I've ever written for ATF :') more than 4000 words long. I really wanted to make chapters longer for you guys because I know I update like...almost never. So when I do update, I want it to be good.

School's about to start in a couple of weeks, and senior year is going to get hectic. :/ I can't promise you when I'll update again, but I will promise you that I'm going to keep up the 300 word goal that I was talking about on my profile as often as I can.

Thank you all for your dedication. Legitimately. I know it sucks to have to wait so long T___T I once waited more than a year, and the person still never updated. BUT I WILL NEVER DO THAT TO YOU GUYS OKAY. I WILL NEVER. The story is picking up now. We're getting closer to the climax, and I can feel the tension building. I've been thinking about the plotline, and I've changed it a lot...in regards to character development. But I think you guys will like the change!

See you next time <3 Check back regularly in case I post something!

~Rainii
~~~~~~

Chapter 23

I promised that I'd update by the end of June, didn't I? (: Enjoy. <3

When Birdpaw woke up, night had already fallen. Scattered beams of moonlight shone gently through the shadowed treetops, lighting up patches of ground with their silvery sheen. It was quiet, and the atmosphere felt almost tranquil, aside from the fact that this was the Rogues' camp, of course.

Birdpaw sat up slowly in her nest. Ever since she arrived here, she had been sharing a den with Hazelpaw and a few other young she-cats. The den was made from strange Twoleg material, unlike Shadeclan's dens, and the similarly foreign bedding sometimes made her sneeze.

Careful not to wake up her denmates, Birdpaw crept quietly past their sleeping forms and poked her head out of the den entrance. There was no one in sight, but a small part of Birdpaw clung stubbornly onto the hope that Blaze was out there somewhere, waiting for her.

Birdpaw stepped outside into the chilly night air, and gave her pelt a slight shake to rid herself of the bits of feathers that clung to her fur. She then looked around, wondering if the ginger tom was anywhere nearby. It was eerily quiet, and Birdpaw couldn't help but feel her limbs tremble. From caution, or from the cold, she wasn't too sure herself.

Birdpaw jumped slightly when she felt a tail-tip touch her shoulder. Spinning around with her fur bristling, she only relaxed when she realized that it was Blaze. He always had a way with approaching her without being noticed, and while it was fun to play hide-and-seek with him, it was also slightly unnerving, especially in situations like this. "Blaze!" she swiped a sheathed paw at him in mock annoyance.

He ducked easily, and butted her shoulder with his head lightly. "Sorry, I didn't want to attract unwanted attention." The ginger tom's tone of voice was cheerful, but Birdpaw thought that she could detect a glint of something darker in his green eyes. Was it worry?

"Well, okay." Birdpaw looked away.

The ginger tom frowned, and tried sticking his head in her face, to which she avoided by turning in the other direction even further. "What's wrong, Birdpaw?" he asked, voice suddenly laced with concern.

"I don't know."

Blaze stepped back and sighed. "Come on, let's talk somewhere that we won't risk getting overheard or caught." He then began padding in the direction towards the entrance, and Birdpaw, not knowing what else to do, reluctantly followed.

~*~

"Okay, it's safe to talk here," Blaze announced.

They were in unfamiliar terrain. Well, at least in Birdpaw's eyes. She had never been in this area of the Rogues' territory before, and she felt slightly worried. But....Blaze could be trusted, right?

She simply gave him a brisk nod, but said nothing.

The ginger tom frowned. "Look, Birdpaw. I know that there are probably many questions swimming through your mind right now, but trust me when I say that we don't have much time left. So, if you trust me and view me as your ally, then let's be honest with each other and forget our circumstances, at least for tonight."

"And if I don't view you as an ally?" Birdpaw looked up at him, searching his green eyes for any clues.

Blaze snorted, and flicked Birdpaw's ear with his tail-tip. "Silly. If you really did view me as your enemy, you wouldn't have followed me out here. Or at least, you would've gotten a couple of your

friends to keep an eye on us. But you came alone, no?"

He did have a point. "All right, you win!" Birdpaw groaned. After taking a deep breath, she mewed with a straight face, "Blaze, why are we friends?"

"I dunno. You met me. I met you. It happened." his tone was nonchalant. So casual that it irked her, somehow.

"But you still didn't answer my question properly," Birdpaw protested, "My question is *why*. Why did you suddenly choose to befriend me, if we come from two completely different worlds?"

Blaze was silent for a moment, before he exhaled slowly. When he started to speak, Birdpaw almost had to strain her ears to hear him, because his voice was so low. "You're like a sister to me, Birdpaw -- the naive, somewhat brash, yet kind-hearted and free-spirited sister I never had.We became friends because I respected all of those qualities about you. Even though you are a clancat and I am a Rogue, I made the choice to believe that you and your friends all have your hearts in the right place. Thus, I never bothered to turn you in. The truth is-"

But he was cut off, as a loud rustling in the bushes alarmed both of them. Birdpaw sprang to her toes and dropped into a crouch with claws unsheathed, ready to confront whatever was out there.

A list of names ran through Birdpaw's mind as she tried to imagine who it could be. *Clawface? Greenfur? Moss? A badger?*

All of her guesses were wrong.

"Birdpaw!" As the familiar small shape emerged from the ferns, Birdpaw gasped and couldn't help but take a step back.

"You?"

It was Hazelpaw, whose ears were flattened and pelt shaking from...guilt? Fear? Birdpaw could feel a wave of conflicting emotions emanating from her best friend.

However, Birdpaw didn't get a chance to hear an answer from

Hazelpaw, because she was too busy feeling horrified as she watched the rest of her group emerge from the shadows. Nightpelt stepped out first, followed by Falconclaw.

"Why are you all here?" Birdpaw felt herself flooded with a mixture of emotions. She was vaguely aware that her ears were laid flat against her head and that her fur was bristling. There were too many questions.

"The real question is, why are *you* here in the middle of the night?" Falconclaw growled, his voice almost shaking from anger and some other emotion that she couldn't identify. His scorching amber gaze searched hers, and Birdpaw found herself lowering her head, unable to answer him.

"I..." Birdpaw looked behind herself helplessly, only to realize with a sinking feeling that there was no one there. Blaze had somehow managed to slip away, most likely. What was she going to tell her friends now?

"Was it your little Rogue friend?" the tabby tom continued in a almost mocking tone. Birdpaw felt her pelt prickle with anger, but also a little bit of shame.

"Blaze wouldn't tell on us," Birdpaw muttered through her teeth. *He wouldn't.* And she could've gotten to hear what the ginger tom had to say too, had they not shown up.

"Okay, that's enough!" Nightpelt stepped between the two of them, and looked pointedly at Falconclaw until the tom let out a loud groan of frustration and took a few steps back. Nightpelt then turned to Birdpaw, and meowed in a low tone, "I'll explain how we found you later, but for now, you're going to have to come with us."

The seriousness in the older warrior's gaze frightened Birdpaw, who nodded quickly and followed after him, with Hazelpaw and Falconclaw close on their heels.

~*~

On the way, Birdpaw learned from Hazelpaw that the reason the group found her was because Hazelpaw had quietly followed Birdpaw from camp. Hazelpaw had wanted to go to the dirtplace, and after she woke up, she realized that Birdpaw was missing. Furthermore, there was also another cat's scent, one which Hazelpaw didn't recognize. Worried about Birdpaw's safety, Hazelpaw decided to follow the scent trail by herself. However, along the way, she had run into Falconclaw and Nightpelt, who were rushing back to camp from a night patrol.

"Wait, so why were they coming back to camp if they were supposed to be on patrol?" Birdpaw frowned. Right now, everyone was running at a fairly brisk pace, and Birdpaw found it difficult to talk, think, and also run at the same time.

"Clawface was the leader of their patrol, and they apparently received directions from Clawface that the night patrol's actual task tonight was to quietly invade into the Clans' territory and familiarize themselves with it. Apparently, Greenfur has plans for 'revenge'. What for, we're not exactly sure, but this is big enough news that we must return to the clans right away, to inform them."

They were slowly nearing the borders of Fireclan now. Birdpaw could feel a tingle of excitement rush through her as she imagined seeing her friends and clanmates again. It hadn't been very many moons since she last returned to Clan territory, but she nevertheless missed everyone deeply.

Just then, a voice cried out, "There they are! Traitors!"

Birdpaw, as well as everyone else skidded to a halt and whipped around to see Clawface and a few other Rogues. It must've been the night patrol that Falconclaw and Nightpelt had been originally sent on. Clawface stepped forward, a sneer crossing his already savage-looking features. "Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Nightpelt's ears flattened as he stepped in front of the group protectively. "Nothing, Clawface. Falconclaw and I were-"

But he was cut off as a Rogue interrupted him, "Falconclaw? Who's that?"

A brief moment of silence fell over the cats as Nightpelt slowly realized his mistake. Clawface took another step forward menacingly and meowed, "I'll tell you who that is. It's him," He gestured towards Falconclaw with a tilt of his head before finishing, "He, as well as all his little friends next to him: they're all *Clancats."*

The bitter tone that Clawface used when he spat out that last word startled Birdpaw. Did the scarred tom have a past related to the clans or something?

However, she didn't have much of a chance to dwell on that thought, because Clawface gestured to the tom next to him, who snarled and lunged for Falconclaw with claws unsheathed. The tabby tom dove to his left, spun around on his toes, and spun back around to face his opponent. The two fell to the ground, sending up a small cloud of dust as they wrestled.

For a few heartbeats, all cats' eyes were upon those two, until they realized that this marked the beginning of a scuffle. With yowls and screeches, the rest of the Rogues leapt forward to attack Birdpaw and the rest of the clancats, who were forced to defend themselves by fighting back.

Birdpaw found herself face-to-face with a large, bulky white tom whose paws looked about the size of her head. She gulped nervously, and was too preoccupied with dodging his swipes to make any attacks of her own. One blow to the head, and she'd surely be doomed.

Just then, Birdpaw found herself losing her balance. She had slipped on something wet and slightly sticky; however, she didn't have the opportunity to check what it was, because the white tom was advancing upon her. She was lying on the ground, defenseless and only able to watch as he slowly brought his paw down and raked his claws along her flank, slicing her flesh open in a long jagged cut.

Birdpaw let out a cry, her mind going blank from the pain. Why hadn't he just killed her? She was starting to feel dizzy, and could only half-hear the tom as he growled something about Greenfur's orders, clan cats, and revenge.

However, all of a sudden, the weight of the tom was lifted off of Birdpaw. Amid all of the chaos, she strained to open her eyes, and saw Nightpelt grappling with the Rogue a few tail-lengths away from her. Birdpaw struggled to get to her feet so that she could somehow rush over and help him, but he just barked at her, "Run! Tell them about what's going on!"

Birdpaw didn't know what to do. She couldn't just abandon her friends here to fight when they were already outnumbered. Plus, she was already injured and wasn't sure how far she could go before someone was able to catch up to her.

She looked around wildly to check on the conditions of the rest of the clancats. Falconclaw was helping Hazelpaw fend off Clawface and another she-cat, while Nightpelt was still struggling to overpower the white tom. Unfortunately, Birdpaw didn't have time to sit around and watch, because she realized that the last member of the patrol was heading her way, most likely to finish her off.

It was the black she-cat whom Birdpaw had spotted talking with Nightpelt. Her eyes were like ice chips, cold and unforgiving, and they sent chills down Birdpaw's spine. She scrambled to her paws in preparation to fight, but somehow ended up slipping in a pool of her own blood and collapsed again. The cut must have been deeper than she thought. Birdpaw closed her eyes, knowing that this time, Nightpelt wouldn't be there to save her.

She was half-right.

It wasn't Nightpelt, but Birdpaw never got the opportunity to go to Starclan either. Confused, she opened her eyes, only to see that Falconclaw had dove in front of her and was now fighting with the black she-cat. They hissed and spat at each other, but it soon became apparent that the tabby tom was gaining the upper hand.

Falconclaw now had the she-cat pinned underneath him, before they heard Nightpelt shriek, "Stop!"

All three of them -- Birdpaw, Falconclaw, and the she-cat -- temporarily froze. Falconclaw stared at the senior warrior, dumbfounded. By doing so, he loosened his grip on the she-cat, who

took advantage of this opportunity to escape from his claws and run into the bushes.

"Why did you do that?" Falconclaw lashed his tail in frustration.

"It doesn't matter," the black tom's voice was flat, before he meowed urgently, "If we meet again, I'll explain to you. But for now, take Birdpaw and Hazelpaw, and return as swiftly as you can to clan territory. You must speak to the leaders and inform them of the current news. Remember what we discussed about earlier, and hurry!"

"But what about you?" Birdpaw burst out as she watched Nightpelt turn around to face the Rogues, who were now standing alongside each other, their lips curled back in identical sneers.

"I'll be fine. Just go!"

Birdpaw couldn't bring herself to imagine the wiry black tom possibly winning against four cats, all of which were able-bodied, well-built fighters. Her heart twisted in agony as she realized that things could have been different had she not been injured. Maybe she could've made the trek back to the clans herself, or at least someone could've been able to stay with Nightpelt. It was her fault.

"Come on, Birdpaw!" Falconclaw's voice brought her out of self-pity, and she staggered up, careful not to slip this time. She was starting to feel woozy from the blood loss, but she knew that now was no time to be soft. The Clans needed them. Nightpelt needed them.

"Do you know the way back?" Falconclaw asked Hazelpaw, before continuing, "Because if you do, then hurry back and inform your clan leader now. Birdpaw's in no state to run too quickly, and we'll probably take forever if we all stay here with her."

Hazelpaw nodded, and mewed quickly, "I'll take care of delivering the news to Iceclan and Fireclan. Good luck, you two," before dashing off into the forest.

"Are you all right?" the tabby tom's voice was soft now, which was something that Birdpaw was definitely not used to. However, there

were more pressing matters to think about, so Birdpaw simply nodded without another word.

It was hard to run, as Falconclaw had to support her heavily, but somehow, amid all the chaos, blood, and fear, Birdpaw felt a sense of security with the tabby tom at her side. Even though they were always arguing, somehow Birdpaw knew that he would never let anything happen to her. A surge of warmth flooded her from head to toe as she realized this, and it gave her the strength to fight on.

~~~~~~

Hey!!! I'm just as anxious to publish this as you are, so I'm going to keep this short and sweet.

The book is reaching its climax soon - I know that I had dragged out the action for far too long in the beginning chapters, and that was my fault. However, just know that there isn't going to be too much left. Expect a lot of bloodshed, deaths, and backstories to be revealed~

Speaking of backstories. Let me know in the comments if you want to know what really happens to Nightpelt! If you haven't gotten it already, he's basically..well, sacrificed himself for Birdpaw and the rest of the group. :/ But, I had originally planned on writing those last scenes in this chapter, before I realized that this would just prolong my update even more. D: But if you want me to write it, COMMENT and let me know :3

Expect more updates soon. (: For now, I'm gonna go celebrate my return to Wattpad with a bit of The Bachelorette and maybe a snack.

Much love and thanks,

Rainii

p.s. I realized just now that what I typed above definitely wasn't short and sweet. whoops HAHAHA but oh well ^^;
~~~~~~

Chapter 24

Had to take a break from writing because I went on a trip and some stuff came up. ^^; But voila! This is a short chapter, but we're coming to a close real soon. Probably only a few more (3-4?) chapters, and then ATF is going to be marked "Completed" for good. GET PUMPED.

Birdpaw found herself in an unfamiliar clearing.

She was surrounded by everyone she knew and loved. Her parents, her clanmates, her friends...

Until one by one, they started to disappear before her eyes.

"Wait! What's going on?"

Birdpaw was frantic, trying to find a way to make them stay.

"Please, don't leave me!"

They were vanishing faster now, so fast that she was barely able to keep track of what was going on. The most frightening part, though, was that whenever she tried approaching one of them, he or she would erupt into flames before her eyes. Birdpaw didn't know what to do; any moves she made only made the situation worse. Trembling with fear and helplessness, she remained rooted in her spot.

Until finally, she was alone.

***"...and suffer a fate that's worse than death..."** A voice sounded from behind Birdpaw, who whipped around only to find that no one was*

there. Even though she wasn't in a cave, the words echoed in a way that sent chills down her spine. Something about them sounded oddly familiar. Where had she heard something like that?

Suddenly, everything went black.

Birdpaw woke up with a start, heart pounding and fur standing on end; she was so overcome with bewilderment and terror that it took her a few moments to register where she was. Birdpaw looked down at her paws, and felt soft moss. The moss that only her nest at home would have. Feeling a little flutter in her chest, she staggered upright and looked around; only then did she realize that this wasn't a dream. She really was back in Shadeclan's apprentices' den. She really was home.

She was home.

Safe.

Falconclaw must have helped her back somehow.

Maybe they ran into a border patrol, and they helped carry her back to camp.

The Rogues.

They were coming.

Nightpelt.

Nightpelt had sacrificed himself to save them.

Birdpaw was flooded with an overwhelming wave of guilt that seemed to cling onto her like a dark cloud that would hang above her head wherever she went. But then again, should that feeling go away in the first place? His death was partly her fault anyways.

Hers.

The word felt final.

Birdpaw was suddenly reminded of all the cats she knew who had

joined Starclan. First was her mother, Willowleaf, who was killed when she was barely young enough to remember. No cat had dared to tell her the truth, but Birdpaw overheard her father discussing it with Blacktail one day. Willowleaf had not died of greencough like her clanmates told her; she was slain by the Rogues.

Next was Eagleflight, the young Fireclan warrior who was killed during the Test of Faith. Although Birdpaw had not been very close to him during the short period of time that they traveled together, Birdpaw still always secretly felt that if she had been able to intercept Hawk's blow sooner, or fought of the gray tom with the belly scar a little bit faster, she could've saved him.

And even the gray tom's death was partially her fault. Birdpaw hadn't meant to kill anybody -- she only wanted to defend herself and rush to her friends' aid as fast as she could. However, that still didn't take away from the fact that he was dead. Maybe he was a good cat off the battlefield. Maybe they could've become acquaintances, or even friends. Maybe he had a mate and kits who loved him very much. But all of those "maybe"s were gone now.

And finally, there was Nightpelt. The wiry, seasoned black tom who had been a mentor and informal group leader to them all throughout this entire journey. The cat who always stepped up first to make major decisions. The one who must have had a painful past of his own, but never failed to put others before himself. The loyal, protective, wise warrior that Birdpaw looked up to and respected. He-

"Birdpaw? Are you awake?" There was a slight scraping of claws on the sandy ground from outside the den. Birdpaw's head snapped up just in time to see a familiar striped head poke in.

"Yes," the light brown she-cat replied quietly. It was almost a sigh.

"Mind if I come inside?"

"...No."

There was a little more rustling as Falconclaw slipped inside the den. He sat about a tail-length away from her, far enough to

respectfully keep his distance but still near enough that she still felt somewhat unnerved by his presence. It wasn't just him, though; she didn't quite want to be near anyone at the moment.

"You should keep away from me," Birdpaw mumbled, trying to shuffle away from him.

The tabby's amber eyes filled with confusion as he cocked his head at her. "Why?" His tone was so casual, so nonchalant that it annoyed her. Why was he acting like nothing bad had ever happened?

"Because."

"Because what?" Falconclaw's question was met with a long moment of silence.

Realizing that Birdpaw wasn't about to speak without further prodding, the tabby tom rose to his paws and slowly padded over to her. He plopped down right in front of her, and, purposefully sticking his nose close to her muzzle, peered into her eyes and coaxed almost in a kit-like way, "Tell me! I'm really good at keeping secrets."

Thanks to her reflexes, Birdpaw almost jumped a full tail-length backwards out of surprise. "No!"

"No? Then I suppose I'll have to make you tell me," Falconclaw's amber eyes were still fixated on Birdpaw as he approached her, becoming closer and closer until he's practically cornered her against the wall of the den.

And then he playfully bowled her over such that she was pinned underneath him. "Will you tell me now that I've defeated you in battle?"

This mouse-brained idiot still thinks it's all a game, Birdpaw thought bitterly. The fact that he was here, so close to her and so warm, reminded her of her nightmare. As much as they argued or didn't get along, Birdpaw didn't want Falconclaw to disappear like he did in her dream -- moreover, she didn't want him to disappear *because*

of her. Birdpaw wasn't blind. She knew that the dream was a warning. A warning that she would eventually lose the ones she loved. Maybe that was what the unknown voice was talking about. The fate that was worse than death.

Clenching her teeth and keeping her gaze cold, Birdpaw silently wriggled out from the tom's grasp. It was much easier than she expected; but then again, it was probably because he didn't expect her to keep struggling. Giving her pelt a brief shake, Birdpaw stalked towards the entrance, only to be stopped by the tabby's next words.

"Look, Birdpaw. I don't know what's gotten into you this time, but I've been sent to check up on you because you've been out cold for days. Violetfoot hasn't slept this entire time because your life could have been in danger from the severe blood loss, and it's a miracle that you actually even made it back to camp, thanks to us running into a friendly Fireclan patrol. During the period of time that you were unconscious, you would thrash and scream in your sleep, and we are all incredibly worried for you. So please, tell me. What's wrong?"

Falconclaw's voice had started off sounding agitated, but by the end had become almost a plea. In fact, he was so oddly persuasive that Birdpaw was tempted to lie down, cover her ears with her paws, and groan in frustration. Why couldn't he just be his usual gruff self and make her life a little bit easier?

The brown she-cat then felt something soft brush her flank. As she turned her head, she was faced with those amber eyes again. Except this time, she felt as if something between them had subtly changed. The tabby's gaze was sincere, filled with concern, and almost...gentle. Birdpaw wanted to trust him, despite the fact that this thought had never once crossed her mind before. Could she?

"You can trust me." Even though she knew that it couldn't have been more than a mere coincidence, it was as if he read her mind.

So she did. From the nightmare, to her suspicions, to her guilt. She told him everything.

~*~

"*and suffer a fate that's worse than death,",* Falconclaw repeated quietly, and Birdpaw shuddered involuntarily in response. She couldn't help it; the words struck a chord somewhere within her.

"...Yeah," she answered weakly.

Falconclaw's face was scrunched up, as if in deep thought. Finally, he asked, "Have you heard something similar to those words before?"

Birdpaw paused to think, before she realized in horror that she had. "Actually, yes." She then confessed to him about eavesdropping on Hailstar and Violetfoot, and the prophecy she had heard. "The last line was very, very similar to those words. I'm not sure why it's not quite the same, though."

"Maybe the prophecy changed," Falconclaw murmured. "Birdpaw-" he began.

Did she say something ridiculous? Was she crazy? She began to mentally prepare herself for all the potentially scathing remarks he could possibly make.

But it turned out that she didn't have to.

"-I just want you to know that despite all the insecurities and interpretations about what your dream and that prophecy could mean, you are and never will be alone. Your father, your clanmates, and your friends -- we will all be here for you, whether you like it or not." Falconclaw meowed evenly. Calmly. Without even the slightest hint of skepticism or, worse, sarcasm. Birdpaw was astounded, if not a little moved.

"But...aren't you afraid of erupting into flames, or whatever that may symbolize?" Birdpaw pressed, her chest suddenly feeling tight.

"No, mouse-brain." And with that, the tabby tom reached out and flicked Birdpaw's ear in an almost affectionate way. She flinched, unused to this sudden treatment, but Falconclaw didn't seem to take

notice of it. "Come on," he meowed, voice suddenly turning serious, "You've missed out on a lot while you were unconscious. There's someone here who you should probably meet."

~~~~~~

Basically a fluff chapter. Haven't had one of those in a while, have we? Even though the drama picks up, sometimes we still need to take a while to slow down and flesh out the details of the plotline. :P In my opinion, at least.

Although it wasn't completely fluff. The dream, and what it potentially symbolizes is critical to this story. And so is the cat that Birdpaw's about to meet in the next chapter. Who could it be? Take your guesses and let's see if you're right!

Until next time,

Rainii <3
~~~~~~

Chapter 25

"Hello, Birdpaw."

Birdpaw couldn't believe her eyes. Out of all the possible cats that could have been standing before her at that moment, this cat was probably one whom she was least expecting.

"...Moss?" she stammered, mentally stopping herself from taking a step back in surprise. Nothing was making any sense to her.

If the tortoiseshell queen had noticed Birdpaw's confusion, she paid no attention to it. "Silverclaw informed me that you have been unconscious for a few sunrises due to an unfortunate skirmish with Clawface and his gang. How are you feeling?"

Sure enough, Birdpaw was not hallucinating. Moss was indeed standing before them. A bit haggard (presumably from traveling all the way from Rogue territory), but well otherwise, it seemed. Hailstar and Silverclaw stood behind her, appearing neither alarmed nor wary. Something felt off; Birdpaw felt as if she were the only one in the den who was unaware of a critical piece in this entire puzzle of a situation.

"I'm all right," she mumbled, shuffling her paws and clearing her throat. Too many questions were swirling in her mind, and she was not sure where to start. "Umm..."

Moss's gaze softened as she stepped forward to touch noses with Birdpaw. "Come, let us speak in Hailstar's den. I am sure that there is much you have not heard about."

~*~

"Wait, you're *what?"*

If Birdpaw was merely surprised before, now she was legitimately

dumbfounded. She looked back and forth repeatedly between Moss and her father in disbelief. "No way! You can't be siblings; you look nothing alike!"

Neither Silverclaw nor Moss answered Birdpaw's outburst, instead sharing a meaningful look that only the two of them seemed to understand. Falconclaw cleared his throat awkwardly, and even he remained silent.

A few more moments of silence later, Birdpaw was forced to accept that what she had just heard was real. Her mind was spinning as she tried to piece together the remaining portions of the mystery involving her clan, her family, and the Rogues. If Silverclaw was Moss's brother, and Moss was Greenfur's sister...

Her heart began to race as a sinking feeling dawned on her. "Father, Greenfur possesses a warrior name because she was once part of us, wasn't she? Us as in...Shadeclan. And our family." The last word came out almost as a whisper.

Birdpaw looked up into Silverclaw's eyes, and very slowly, the deputy tilted his chin in the smallest of nods.

~*~

"Greenfur, Mossfern, and I were once very close littermates. We were quite a rambunctious bunch, and from as far as I recall, Greenfur was always our unofficial leader. She, always the ambitious one out of us three, would plan our adventures, come up with stupid ideas, and protect us. She was a great sister, clanmate, and role model," Silverclaw meowed quietly.

Calmly. As if he were not at all involved.

"We practically had our lives planned out -- Greenfur would become leader, I would be her deputy, and Mossfern would become our medicine cat. Together, we naively believed we could make Shadeclan the strongest clan ever."

Silverclaw paused here, and Moss took over, "But of course, that did not go as smoothly as we had hoped. For one, I was a terrible

medicine cat apprentice. Sorting herbs and healing sick cats just was not the right role for me -- I was too brash, too fond of the thrills that came along with hunting and being a warrior." Moss and Silverclaw both let out a small *mrrow* of amusement at that, as if there was some inside joke that was shared between the two of them which no other cat knew of.

But the light-hearted spirit in the den simmered down as Silverclaw resumed, "But what really strained our relationship was the day I was promoted to deputy. Greenfur was angry and embarrassed because I, the younger brother, was chosen over her. She felt betrayed, especially because she was everything I was and more. Thus, she became bitter, eventually abandoning Shadeclan because she claimed that she was tired of being overlooked. Sometimes I wonder if everything would be different had I given the position to her."

The silver warrior paused here, his gaze downcast. For the first time ever, Birdpaw realized, she was seeing her father for who he truly was: not just the strong and noble deputy of Shadeclan, but also a loyal clan cat and devoted brother who had vulnerabilities and secrets.

"That is where you are mistaken, Silverclaw." a voice sounded from beside Birdpaw, which was revealed to be Violetfoot.

Ignoring everyone's baffled stares, the blue-gray she-cat seized the opportunity to explain, "The night before Silverclaw was promoted to deputy, Starclan sent me a vision. I saw two paths: the left fork was a green, grassy path, while the right was shone silvery blue from being illuminated by the stars. Somehow, I saw that the left path led to bloodshed and darkness, but the right path was bright and seemed to lead a way out of the darkness." Violetfoot then reached over with her paw and gently placed it over Silverclaw's, meowing, "Do you see now? Our warrior ancestors must have had their reasons for sending me that vision. Do not ever blame yourself for this, because Shadeclan could not have asked for a better deputy."

Birdpaw watched as her father slowly cast his gaze downward and bowed his head; whether it was from pain or acceptance, she did

not know. Perhaps a mixture of both. Birdpaw wished that she could do something to comfort him. Even though her littermate had died when she was barely a few moons old, Birdpaw could still imagine how hard it must be to become separated from a sibling. Silverclaw didn't deserve this; it was Greenfur's fault for letting jealousy consume her.

"Violetfoot is right," Moss agreed, edging closer to Silverclaw such that their pelts brushed, "Shadeclan needs you to lead it out of its darkest hour."

"Darkest hour?" Birdpaw echoed, confused.

Moss turned to face Birdpaw and mewed, "I came back to Shadeclan because I wanted to warn you of Greenfur's plans. She has gathered up a mob of former clan cats who felt similarly overlooked by their leaders, ex-kittypets, and random rogue cats in search of shelter. They're planning to attack the clans on the next new moon. First, they've tried to turn you against each other by purposefully stealing prey from your territories, and now they're going to try and conquer you one by one. You must not fall for her trap -- uniting all three clans will be the only way to survive."

Birdpaw gritted her teeth, unable to believe her ears. "And this is all because she didn't get to be deputy, and eventually, leader of Shadeclan? Is she crazy?"

Silverclaw flinched. Sensing that she had crossed a line of some sorts, Birdpaw instantly felt horribly guilty. "I'm sorry," she mewed quietly, unable to meet his gaze.

"It's all right," the silver warrior reassured her, but his voice seemed hollow for some reason or another. However, no cat seemed to want to press him for answers. All of a sudden, Silverclaw looked much older and ragged than before. Perhaps he was haunted by something in his past.

"So, what now?" Falconclaw broke the silence. His face was masked by a neutral expression, but Birdpaw could feel the tension in his limbs as she was seated next to him.

"We should alert the other two clans of the Rogues' plans immediately," Hailstar meowed, rising to his paws and raking his gaze over everyone in the den, as if calculating something. After a brief moment's worth of hesitation, the Shadeclan leader continued, "Silverclaw, you must send messengers to the two other clans immediately. Inform them that the three leaders and deputies must meet tonight to discuss a battle plan. We must be ready for the Rogues, but we cannot be unless we are together in this. Also-"

"Help! Shadeclan!" a voice shrieked from outside, causing every cat in the den to spring to their paws, pelts bristling. They hurried outside, only to see Hazelpaw.

"What happened?" Hailstar demanded as his gaze swept up and down the small brown she-cat, who was covered in scratches and panting as if she had just sprinted here.

"The Rogues," Hazelpaw gasped between gulps of air, "They have come to attack Iceclan!"

Short chapter. Will update very soon. I only have a month to finish this :(but hang on tight -- the climax is coming.

~Rainii

Chapter 26

Twigs snapped and freshly fallen leaves crackled loudly as Birdpaw and her clanmates raced down a slope toward Iceclan territor. Hailstar led the group, followed closely by Silverclaw and Falconclaw. Violetfoot lagged a little ways behind, but the medicine cat was surprisingly agile and swift despite her duties rarely requiring her to ever run at such speeds.

Birdpaw's heart thudded against her chest, and her surroundings were a chaotic blur of brown, green, and grey. However, there was only one word on her mind which repeated itself.

Faster. Faster.

Faster.

Iceclan resided across from the river, but Hazelpaw led the Shadeclan cats to a hidden narrow strip of land that offered a path across the water without them having to get their pelts wet. The Shadeclan cats were visibly relieved: they would not have to swim, and this shortcut would conserve time, a precious resource.

The camp was nestled away out of sight, protected by the swift current and nearby tall reeds. However, this also meant that it was difficult to escape in times of emergencies. As the camp itself slowly came into view, Birdpaw felt her heart sink.

Iceclan was utterly destroyed.

Dens were torn to shreds, the ground was smeared with dried patches of blood, and the scent of death lingered in the air. They had been too late; the battle seemed to be already over.

"Clan cats!" a familiar yowl caused everyone to turn their attention to their left. Birdpaw narrowed her eyes, recognizing Clawface, the

second-in-command of the Rogues.

"I am here to inform you that the Rogues are almost ready to unleash their revenge on the Clans. Today, as you can see, marks only the very beginning. Prepare yourselves....or not, since you are nothing compared to us!" the scarred tom snarled, baring his teeth at the group menacingly before whirling around and disappearing into the willows.

Birdpaw threw a glance at Hailstar, curious to see her leader's reaction. However, the blue-grey tom seemed unfazed. Hailstar turned his head back to meet the eyes of his clan, and meowed, "There is neither need nor room for fear now, Shadeclan. Let us help Iceclan first, before we plan anything else, for we are allies now -- the time has come for the clans to unite."

~*~

Iceclan had suffered devastating losses from the Rogue attack. Many of the weak were slain, and there was not a single cat without noticeable injury. Faint mewls of hunger echoed through the trees.

"Goldpaw? Goldpaw please, answer me!"

Birdpaw felt as if she were frozen as she stared down at the familiar ginger pelt. However, her friend was barely recognizable. Goldpaw's formerly beautiful face had been mauled, and a long bloody gash ran from the tip of her shoulder to her haunches, oozing crimson into a pool that surrounded the barely-breathing she-cat.

Just like in the dream, Birdpaw recalled with a sharp intake of breath. Cats whom she were close to always died, for reasons unknown. Therefore...was this her fault too?

Goldpaw moved a little, and foam formed in her mouth, as if she were struggling to say something. A golden-brown tom bent forward to try and make out her words, whom Birdpaw recognized as Brackentail. The tom that her friend was mooning after during the Gathering which they had first met.

That Gathering seemed several lifetimes ago.

It seemed as if the two exchanged a few words, for Brackentail nodded, before whispering something into the ginger she-cat's ear. Then, he gave her one last gentle lick on her cheek, before stepping back with his head bowed.

Goldpaw's eyes slowly closed, and her limbs stopped moving.

"...Wh-what did my sister say?" Hazelpaw's voice broke the silence. Birdpaw cast a glance over at her friend, and realized that the small brown she-cat was trembling. A wave of disgust washed over Birdpaw as she realized how selfish she was being; Hazelpaw had just lost both her love and her sister, and here Birdpaw was, fretting over her own stupid problems.

Brackentail was quiet for a few heartbeats, before meowing in a low voice, "She told me that she wished she had the courage to tell me she loved me sooner. She wanted to do that today, as today was going to be her warrior ceremony. She also told me to tell you that she loves you, and that it was not your fault for being unable to save her."

Hazelpaw was still for a long moment, so long that Birdpaw began to worry. But then, the brown she-cat slowly dipped her head and whispered, "Very well."

"Are you sure you're holding up fine?" Birdpaw scooted closer to her friend's side in an attempt to offer some comfort.

The medicine cat apprentice nodded, more firmly this time. "Yes, my clanmates need me. Grieving will do not good now; as an aspiring medicine-cat, it is my duty to keep my focus on those who are still living."

Birdpaw felt her heart well with pride and admiration for Hazelpaw. Although she seemed small and frail compared to her more rambunctious sister, Birdpaw knew that Hazelpaw was just as strong-willed and brave. Watching her friend haul herself to her paws and, despite her apparent exhaustion, continue to serve her clan inspired Birdpaw and gave her a faint flicker of hope.

~*~

"Let all cats able to catch their own prey gather beneath the Rock for a clan meeting!"

Birdpaw looked up at the large rock that Hailstar, as well as the other two clan leaders were standing on. Fireclan had arrived a little later in the day, after Hailstar sent Featherpelt to fetch them. With all three clans gathered, Birdpaw felt a little more at ease. However, a part of her still worried, for she knew that after the raid, Iceclan barely had any warriors who were able to fight.

"Greetings, my fellow Clan cats," Hailstar meowed, and instantly, the crowd ceased its murmurs. Every pair of eyes was fixated on the three leaders; shoulders were tense and ears were pricked.

After a slight pause and a sideways glance at the two other leaders, Hailstar resumed in a steady voice, "After discussing extensively with Sunstar and Velvetstar, we have come to a consensus regarding the prey-stealing, the Rogues, and the devastation that occurred today."

There were a few whispers here and there, but Hailstar continued, "We have spoken to our medicine cats, who have confirmed that the Rogues are to blame for any suspicious activities around our borders. It seems that they have been planning this for many moons: and by 'this', I mean attempts to divide us. Cause us to lose trust in the other two clans."

The murmurs grew louder. Some cats lowered their heads, while others still cast suspicious glances at those who did not belong to their clan. However, despite the stirrings, Hailstar continued, "Clancats, please. We cannot do this alone. We must unite, for that is the only way we can hope to defeat the Rogues, once and for all!"

"Shadeclan is right," Sunstar meowed as he stepped forward to address the clans. "Fireclan will join you in this final battle!"

"As will Iceclan," Velvetstar declared in agreement.

~*~

The night breeze whispered its way among the trees, causing the branches to rustle. Birdpaw shivered slightly from the cold; leaf-fall was coming, and it will be followed closely by leaf-bare. It seemed like forever ago that she was first promoted to being an apprentice. It was almost unfathomable how things have changed since then.

Quite frankly, Birdpaw did not even know why she was still foolishly waiting here for Blaze to arrive. However, she knew that she would not be at ease until she could speak to him and hopefully garner some answers.

If he showed up, at least.

"Birdpaw," a familiar voice sounded from behind the tabby she-cat, causing her to jump a little.

Glancing over her shoulder, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Hi, Blaze."

However, as Birdpaw studied the ginger tom, she was not sure whether she should feel alarmed or worried. At first glance, Blaze seemed fine, but if one were to look closely, one would notice the scratches on his pelt and that he was breathing heavily.

Before she had the chance to open her mouth and ask, though, Blaze cut her off. "Birdpaw, you are in danger."

"Wh-what?" Birdpaw was thoroughly taken aback. "Why?"

The ginger tom shook his head stubbornly, "There is little time to explain, but Greenfur is going to unleash her attack on the clans soon. By then, it will be too late. She is going to destroy everything. All of you."

"But, what does this have to do with me specifically? Why do you want to save me?"

"You are the daughter of Silverclaw, that's why! Silverclaw, her brother, who took everything she had. Her position as deputy, her happiness. You are Silverclaw's happiness, and she wants to destroy

that," Blaze's voice was slightly raised in pitch now, from agitation.

"How do you know all of this? Blaze, *who are you?"*

"Can't you see, Birdpaw? I am your friend, and I am trying to protect you while I still can. I kn-I know your destiny; please, you have to trust me!"

Birdpaw was silent for a moment as she contemplated the possibility, as well as everything else that had occurred in the past few nights. A part of her was tempted to leave everything behind and flee. Somehow -- the genuine tone of his plea, the desperateness in his once-masked green gaze, led her to believe him. She *could* trust him.

But Birdpaw remembered her clanmates. Her friends, and her family. She remembered Hazelpaw, who had lost two of the cats whom she loved most dearly but is still working tirelessly to treat her injured clanmates. She remembered Moss, who had secretly traveled all the way here with her kits to warn the clans of the impending attack. She remembered Nightpelt, who had sacrificed himself for the group.

She remembered Falconclaw, who was always there, sharp tongue or no, to fight by her side.

Birdpaw knew her answer.

"Blaze, I trust you," she admitted, and saw the ginger tom relax. However, before he got the chance to respond, she pressed on, "...But I cannot leave with you. My duty lies here, with the clans. It would be selfish of me to leave everyone I love behind."

Their eyes met for a moment, exchanging all the unspoken words, all the once-hidden emotions that now feel too raw, too real to bear. Green met green, until finally Blaze looked away.

"Very well. I respect your decision," he meowed quietly, taking a few steps back. The ginger tom turned away from Birdpaw, and took a few steps in the direction he came from. After hesitating for a few heartbeats, Blaze looked over his shoulder and warned, "Next

time we meet, we will be on opposite sides of the battlefield. There is not much time left, Birdpaw. Beware of Greenfur."

And with a rustle of the bushes, he was gone.

Birdpaw felt a sudden, sharp ache in her chest. Part of her wanted to call out to Blaze, to admit that he was very important to her. All the nights that they met, all the fun times they had playing together -- those will remain treasured memories to her for as long as she lived. However, she stayed rooted to her spot, jaws clenched shut, because she knew that their friendship, and the remnants of her childish crush on him were not meant to be.

Their paths had never meant to cross.

Birdpaw felt powerless, and a mixture of sorrow and longing. But she did not feel regret. And all of a sudden, what she had to do now felt much clearer to her.

She turned and ran, back towards the river. Back, toward her clan, and her loved ones.

~*~

When Birdpaw neared Iceclan's camp, she noticed a familiar scent in the air.

"Birdpaw!" a voice hissed. Birdpaw glanced sharply toward her left side, and spotted a familiar dark tabby pelt.

"Falconclaw?" she stammered.

The tabby tom trotted up to her, pelt fluffed up from the cold. He sniffed her cautiously, and his amber eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You have Rogue scent on you," he observed, before realizing, "You were with him again, weren't you?"

"Yes," Birdpaw dropped her gaze, and cleared her throat awkwardly.

"Why?"

The simple question caught Birdpaw off guard. Falconclaw had not threatened to tell Hailstar. He did not sound hostile either. She looked up, and saw nothing but genuine confusion in his eyes.

"He wanted to warn me that Greenfur is planning on attacking soon," Birdpaw exhaled. It felt nice to confide in someone at last.

"Is he not a Rogue, though? What would make him want to come and tell you all of this?"

Birdpaw hesitated for a moment, before she admitted, "Blaze asked me to leave with him, because Greenfur was after me. I know that all of this seems incredibly suspicious to you, but I trust Blaze. I know he was telling the truth."

Falconclaw was quiet. Birdpaw cast him a glance, feeling a prickle of nervousness. Was he going to bash on her for being bee-brained again?

But the tabby tom did not. Instead, he simply asked quietly, "So what made you stay here, with us?"

Birdpaw felt something click in her mind. Turning around, she squared her shoulders and stared right into the dark tabby warrior's eyes. "I chose to stay for the very same reasons that any other warrior would. As a member of Shadeclan, it is my duty to fight until my last breath to defend my fellow clanmates and friends. I would never betray my clan for my own safety."

As she stood there, Birdpaw realized that, although subtle, something had changed within her over the past season. It was not just the fact that she had grown taller and stronger. Somehow, she felt that the quest to Rogue territory, befriending Blaze, and defending her clan had matured her. She no longer felt as naive and small. No, Birdpaw was different now. And she sensed that Falconclaw seemed to have realized it too, in the same moment.

"I respect your decision," Falconclaw finally responded.

They were the exact same words that Blaze had said to her. But something about them felt different.

"Let us go back to camp, before we are missed," Birdpaw mewed briskly, severing the eye contact. All of a sudden, she felt incredibly awkward standing out here with Falconclaw. Feeling her pelt prickle with heat, she stalked past the dark tabby and broke into a light jog towards the camp entrance.

Falconclaw must have felt similarly, because on the way back, they did not speak another word to each other.

~~~~~~

Almost there, guys. Hang on tight.

I have to hang on too LOL. I'm leaving for college early Saturday morning. And it's like...wow. I'm excited, but also nervous.

And incredibly stressed because I still have to finish this (I promised...to both you and myself). It's hopefully just gonna be the final battle chapter, and then an epilogue. There honestly isn't much more to go. And ideally I'll be back with a special one-shot or something as a Christmas treat ;) who knows?

This is gonna be a real time crunch....a;weklfjawlkejf but I think it's about time to wrap this book up. (: Keep on checking back, because the end is coming. Fast.

And of course, as usual, thanks for reading and for all the support. ^_^ but...sappy notes later. Onto the climax.

xx Rain
~~~~~~

Chapter 27

NOTE: In case you get confused during this chapter....please refer back to the prophecy because I strove to follow it as closely as possible. See if you can figure it out (: it shouldn't be too hard, though.

The next few days passed by in a blur for Birdpaw. After the mock Gathering, the three clans had agreed to remain at Iceclan's camp in preparation for the battle with the Rogues. Each day, warriors and apprentices were kept busy patrolling, hunting, and rebuilding Iceclan's ravaged camp. The leaders were rarely seen -- it was assumed that they were preoccupied with discussing battle plans.

Birdpaw herself was incredibly busy, too. When she was not out hunting, she was training with Blacktail or helping Hazelpaw out with gathering herbs. In fact, sometimes she was so wrapped up in her work that she would forget to eat or rest. However, Birdpaw did not pay too much notice; there was always work to be done, and Blaze's last words always reminded her that Greenfur could be here any day. Thus, there was not a moment's worth of time to waste.

She had not talked to Falconclaw very much since the last night she saw Blaze. Part of it was because there was simply no need: every cat was focused on preparing for the upcoming final battle. However, Birdpaw still could not shake off the awful feeling that her being busy was just a lousy excuse.

As Birdpaw casually surveyed the camp in search of her next task, it became apparent to her just how drastically every cat's life had been changed by the Rogues' emergence. On the first day that the three clans merged together, it was clear that cats were still wary of those who did not belong to their clan. There was a bit of distrust which led to arguments, which the deputies tried their hardest to resolve peacefully. However, Birdpaw felt her heart well up with

pride and warmth as she saw these very same cats now helping one another as if they had been clanmates since the beginning of time. She saw Fernpelt nursing orphaned Iceclan kits as if they were her own, while taking care of an expecting Fireclan queen. She saw her father working tirelessly to organize patrols and rebuilding efforts, and was glad to see that he seemed respected, even among Fireclan and Iceclan warriors.

Birdpaw spotted Falconclaw from across the camp. He seemed to be deep in conversation with a brown she-cat from another clan. The two seemed happy; Birdpaw thought she even saw the she-cat swipe a paw at Falconclaw playfully.

The brown tabby she-cat instantly felt annoyed by this action. Before she knew it, she had strode halfway across the clearing, directly towards them.

Falconclaw seemed to notice that something was off as soon as he saw Birdpaw approaching. Breaking off his conversation, he padded over to greet her. "Hey," he meowed casually, "How are you?"

"I'm doing absolutely fine, thank you for asking." Birdpaw snapped. She did not even know why she was angry. Falconclaw had done nothing wrong -- there was no harm in taking a break from his duties. And, there was definitely no harm in making friends from other clans. What was wrong with her?

The tabby warrior took a step back in surprise. "Featherpelt mentioned that you seemed stressed lately. Is something wrong?"

"Something wrong? We are all working our tails off and you are over here relaxing like a lazy kittypet, and you ask me what's wrong?" The insult came flying out of her mouth before she even realized what she had said.

Birdpaw almost winced when she saw hurt flash across Falconclaw's amber eyes. She instantly felt overwhelmed with guilt. What was she doing? "Sorry," Birdpaw muttered, regretting all of this. She felt her pelt prickle with shame, but was at a loss as to how to fix this mess that she made.

Falconclaw was silent for a few heartbeats, and it seemed as if he were trying to figure out something. However, before he had the chance to reply, a screech caused them both to jump.

Birdpaw's blood ran cold. Was this the moment they had all been dreading?

~*~

"The Rogues! They have arrived!" gasped an Iceclan warrior while throwing a backwards glanced behind him as he sprinted through the camp entrance.

Instantly, every cat sprang into action, following exactly what the leaders had instructed them to do previously. Elders and kits were herded into a nearby sheltered cave, where a few warriors were assigned the task of protecting them. Luckily, the last patrols had just returned, so every clan cat was in camp. Warriors quickly grouped up and formed a close-knit mob, and the clan leaders emerged to take their place at the front.

Every pair of eyes were fixated on the camp entrance, where the clan cats expected Rogues to walk through any moment. Birdpaw, caught up in all of the chaos, had hardly any room to think or fear.

"Greetings, my beloved clans," a voice resonated from the camp entrance; it was a voice so steely and cold, it could only belong to her.

Greenfur.

The clan leaders did not respond. Although the three of them appeared to be relaxed, Birdpaw could see the tension reflected in their eyes.

"Clans, I have a proposal for you," Greenfur meowed calmly, before adding, "Well, more specifically, Shadeclan."

A long while passed, before Velvetstar gave a small nod to Hailstar, who acknowledged it and meowed, "What is it, Greenfur?"

"My, Hailstar. It has been a while since we have last spoken. I am

honored that you still remember me."

"Spit it out already, Greenfur. We have not got all day," growled Sunstar.

The mottled brown she-cat ignored him. Taking a few measured steps forward, she crooned, "Now, now. Let us act like civilized cats and not claw at every little thorn, shall we?"

"Greenfur," Hailstar's voice held a threatening edge.

"All right. I have a deal for you, so listen up," Greenfur's eyes grew serious, before she uttered something that no cat would have expected.

"Hand over Silverclaw and Birdpaw, and you will be spared. Refuse, and I will signal my Rogues to attack."

Hailstar said nothing.

There were murmurs of confusion among the crowd of clan cats. Birdpaw felt a wave of heat wash over her pelt, and her fur began to bristle in both fear and anxiety. If she and her father volunteered themselves, Greenfur would spare everyone. She desperately looked around for her father's trademark silver fur, but the deputy was nowhere to be seen.

"Relax," a voice hissed in Birdpaw's ear. She whipped her head around, only to come face-to-face with Falconclaw, who muttered in a low voice, "Don't even consider it. Greenfur would never spare us, even if she was able to get her claws on the two of you."

Birdpaw had not even realized how stiff her shoulders were from being tensed up. Consciously relaxing them, she mulled over the tabby warrior's words. *He's right,* she realized. This was just a trap.

"Well?" Greenfur prompted with a flick of her tail.

"We refuse," Hailstar responded simply.

"How foolishly noble...I would not expect any less from you, Hailstar," the Rogue leader yawned, before licking her lips slowly.

"In that case, it is finally time for us, the forgotten ones, to satisfy our thirst for revenge. Rogues, attack!"

With a shrill caterwaul, Clawface led the way through the entrance with the rest of the Rogues close behind. There were cats of all shapes and sizes, but each and every one of them seemed an able fighter. The clan cats rushed to meet them, and battle cries echoed through the trees as the long-awaited fight began at last.

~*~

Amid the blurs of grappling cats and shrill cries, Birdpaw found herself face-to-face with several Rogues. They would exchange blows, and sometimes one or the other would land a scratch, but for some reason, the opponent would always dart off before the fight was "finished".

Something felt off, but Birdpaw decided against worrying about it, since too much was going on already.

Birdpaw looked around, bracing herself for the next attacker. However, just then, she spotted Silverclaw from a few fox-lengths away. Her father seemed to be speaking with someone -- Greenfur, Birdpaw recognized.

Worried for her father, she decided to somehow get closer to investigate what was going on.

Birdpaw slowly, yet carefully navigated her way among the brawling cats over to the other side, where she hid behind a nearby rock. It was just barely close enough that she could make out what they were saying.

"Greenfur, please," Silverclaw's tone was almost pleading-like as he meowed, "I never intended to be deputy!" Birdpaw had never seen her father speak this way before. There was none of the usual air of authority, and that made Birdpaw uneasy.

Birdpaw saw Greenfur's eyes narrow with a mixture of hatred and disgust. "No, it is too late now, *brother,"* she spat.

"But why? Why do this to us?"

"Foolish brother. Can't you see? It is not just me. The Rogues are composed of former clan cats who were tired of being unappreciated and neglected by their clan. Tired of being overlooked. I, understanding firsthand what this felt like, convinced them to leave the clans with me. Under my command, their work will not go unnoticed. I will give them glory and power. Together, we will defeat the clans, and rule the forest!"

"Then what about Birdpaw? Why did you ask for her?"

"She is your daughter. She is all you have. What better way to seek revenge than to destroy what is most precious to you? And I will destroy her by doing the same: I will destroy everyone and everything she loves."

Silverclaw ignored her question, instead pressing, "Why have you become like this, Greenfur? You are not the sister that I knew and loved."

Greenfur did not bother to answer him. Instead, the battle-scarred she-cat lunged toward Silverclaw, who narrowly sidestepped her. She snarled in frustration, before dashing toward him again in attack. However, it was clear that Silverclaw did not want to fight his sister. He only dodged her blows, never attempting to land any of his own.

Birdpaw watched all of this in silence, her heart racing. This seemed to be a private battle, meant for only the two of them. It did not feel right to interfere. However, she still worried for her father's safety. Should she leave and attempt to help her other clanmates? Or should she stay here?

Unfortunately, Birdpaw did not have the time to decide. Suddenly, she was swept off her feet --- Birdpaw landed on her back, winded. Someone had snuck up on her! *Fox dung!* Birdpaw cursed herself for being too careless.

While her mind was trying to register all of this, her attacker loomed over her. Trying to shake off the dizziness, Birdpaw was

able to barely make out the shape of Clawface. With a low growl, he taunted, "Oh no, little Bird is about to get her wings cut off."

"Birdpaw!" she thought she heard Silverclaw gasp. As a result, she vainly tried to haul herself back upright, only have the wind knocked out of her again. Her vision became blurry from the buzzing in her brain, but Birdpaw was still able to recognize Greenfur taking advantage of this situation and successfully pinning her brother down.

"Father!" Birdpaw shrieked, but unable to help him. She writhed and struggled against Clawface's grip, but the tom only slammed a paw down on her throat, causing her to whimper in pain.

Was this the end?

She was going to lose everything, just like the dream and prophecy foretold.

Suddenly, the weight of Clawface was dragged off of her. Birdpaw opened her eyes, confused, and scrambled to her paws just in time to see a familiar ginger pelt wrestling with Clawface in the dust.

Could it be?

"Blaze!" Birdpaw cried, unsure of how to act.

But there was no time to think about that. Birdpaw whipped around and sprinted towards where Silverclaw lay. However, she skidded to a stop as she realized that Greenfur stood in front of him, blocking her way. The Rogue's lips were curled back in a sneer as she spat, "Your father is dead, and now it is your turn!"

Birdpaw felt anger bubble up in her chest and spread throughout her limbs; like tongues of flame, it lapped at her veins and soul as she unsheathed her claws and growled, "Try me."

In response, Greenfur lunged at her, claws aiming directly for Birdpaw's throat.

Remembering a move that Blacktail had once taught her, Birdpaw flattened herself against the ground and dove forward such that she

was underneath the she-cat. As the two passed each other, Birdpaw raised a paw and raked her claws down Greenfur's left flank.

She heard the she-cat curse, which was good. But the fight was far from over.

"Clever, aren't we? Using Shadeclan's own moves against me. How ironic," Greenfur murmured and dropped into a crouch. She began to circle around Birdpaw, who responded by circling in the opposite direction and mirroring Greenfur's every move. They were both waiting for the other to make the first move.

Eventually, Birdpaw grew impatient and decided to attack first. Launching herself at Greenfur, Birdpaw bowled the she-cat over and they began to swipe at each other while struggling to gain the upper hand.

Greenfur's larger size and fighting experience made her a formidable opponent. However, Birdpaw's recent training had helped her fighting skills improve immensely. As long as Birdpaw remained completely focused, there was a chance that she could win.

"I know your destiny," Greenfur growled as she aimed a swipe at Birdpaw's cheek, which the apprentice narrowly dodged.

"What do you mean?" Birdpaw asked through gritted teeth as she fought to keep the older she-cat's claws from grazing her belly. However, this did not stop her mind from remembering Blaze's last words to her. He knew her destiny, he had said.

Was that merely a coincidence?

Birdpaw's train of thought was interrupted as Greenfur managed to land on top of her. She kicked and writhed, but to no avail. Greenfur was stronger than she.

"You are so naive," Greenfur reached over and, very slowly, drew one sharp claw down Birdpaw's left shoulder. "I did not think any cat would be mouse-brained enough to actually believe that."

Birdpaw spat in Greenfur's face, to which she responded by digging

her claws into Birdpaw, who yelped in pain. "I had originally planned on killing you in front of your father, to cause him even more agony, but this will suffice."

"Why? My father loved you until the very end! He refused to fight back, even when you were trying to kill him," Birdpaw glared up at her defiantly.

"Then he is weak!" Greenfur shook her head in mock disbelief. "That is why he would have been a terrible choice for deputy, and yet, Hailstar was crazy enough to pick him over me. I will never understand your stupid warrior code."

"My father never wanted to be deputy. Violetfoot had a vision; Starclan chose him, not Hailstar. My father is no coward; he is courageous and generous enough to forgive you for all that you did to him. You, however, are heartless! Shadeclan would be ruined had you been chosen."

Greenfur faltered for a heartbeat, and Birdpaw seized her chance to aim a swipe at the she-cat's eyes. Unfortunately, Greenfur recovered just before Birdpaw was able to make contact, and the Rogue leader easily knocked Birdpaw's claws out of the way, tightening her grip over her even more.

From out of the corner of her eye, Birdpaw saw Blaze. She was not sure how long the ginger tom had been standing there, watching, but she could tell that he seemed to be struggling to decide between something.

"Blaze," Birdpaw whispered hoarsely.

Blaze's green eyes were dark, and he was trembling. Slowly, he slunk forward, and Birdpaw saw his muscles tense as the ginger tom sprang up and bowled Greenfur over, simultaneously managing to pin her down. Birdpaw instantly rose to her paws, shaking her pelt free of the dirt. She still did not know why he had betrayed his leader for her.

Greenfur stared up at Blaze, eyes narrowing in fury when she realized what had just happened. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

"Have you forgotten my instructions?"

Blaze was silent.

The mottled brown she-cat let out a snarl of frustration. "Do not be blinded, Storm! Remember who it was that saved you from those foxes when you were still a kit. Remember who it was that fed you, protected you, and taught you to fight. Me! It was me!"

Storm?

Was that what Greenfur had just called him?

"I gave you a second chance at life, Storm. It was I who had given you your current name, to honor your newfound identity. Why would you betray me, the one who gave you all you have now, for the very cat whom I instructed you to spy on?"

Birdpaw was shocked. She had no idea this entire time.

Turning her attention back to Blaze, Birdpaw realized that the tom must have been struggling over this the entire time.

Birdpaw watched the ginger tom take a deep breath. Slowly, he finally said, "Greenfur, I have not forgotten. I will forever remember that you saved me, and for as long as I live, I will consider you my mother."

"So what are you waiting for? Kill her!"

"No."

"...No?" Greenfur's eyes were blazing with anger and disbelief as she repeated in a low voice.

When Blaze spoke again, his voice was filled with pain. "I am grateful for all that you have done for me, but I cannot let you hurt Birdpaw."

Birdpaw watched in silence as the ginger tom raised a trembling paw, and slowly brought it down across Greenfur's throat. The she-cat let out a choked gurgle, and Blaze stumbled off of her, standing

as tremors ran through her mangled body.

The Rogue leader stopped moving.

Birdpaw was about to say something, before she realized that something was wrong. Blaze was trembling, but not all of it was from grief. Slowly, the ginger tom crumpled and he sank to the ground, where he lay, gasping.

"Blaze!" Birdpaw rushed over to him, panicked. "Blaze, what's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Claw...face," Blaze choked out as he rolled over, exposing a deep gash along his flank. Blood poured out freely, and Birdpaw realized that it was not going to stop no matter how many medicine cats there were. It was a miracle that he had survived so long already.

"Oh Blaze, I'm so sorry," Birdpaw dropped down beside her friend and pressed her nose into his fur. "I had no idea about all of this. I wish I could have done something."

"Nothing...you could have done," Blaze coughed, spitting up blood. He inhaled sharply, before swallowing hard and continuing in a whisper, "I'm...sorry, for deceiving you. Wish...told you...truth..."

Blaze began to cough again, except this time, he could not seem to stop. Birdpaw was frantic now, desperately covering his gash with her paws even though she knew it would be of little use.

"Please, please just rest, I'll find a medicine cat! We will take care of you!" she begged.

The ginger tom shook his head regretfully. "Forgive me," he choked out, before closing his eyes for the last time.

"No!" Birdpaw felt her voice rise to a wail. "Please! Blaze, you can't die!"

By now, the fighting had ceased. Upon discovering their leader's corpse, many of the Rogues turned tail and fled, while others were held prisoner by the clan cats. A small crowd was gathering to see what was the matter, but Birdpaw paid them no notice.

She laid beside Blaze's body, grieving for the loss of her best friend, refusing to budge until she felt herself losing consciousness.

~*~

Birdpaw found herself alone in a clearing. The same one which she recognized to be from her previous dream. Fear gripped her; what was happening?

It was foggy, but she could feel pawsteps approaching. Squinting, Birdpaw struggled to make out the shape. "Who are you?"

The figure did not answer, instead coming closer and closer. When it finally stepped out of the mist, Birdpaw let out a small gasp.

"Father!"

She felt overjoyed, yet heartbroken to see the familiar tabby pelt of the Shadeclan deputy. However, Silverclaw seemed different than he was when he was still alive. Her father seemed younger, happier, and filled with youthful energy. "Well done, Birdpaw."

Birdpaw felt an inexplicable kind of sorrow well up in her chest. She shook her head furiously and protested, "No, I didn't do anything! Blaze was the one who saved us all, and I couldn't even save you. I am sorry."

Silverclaw let out a low purr, and reached out to touch noses with Birdpaw. "No, little one. Do not blame yourself, for you could not have saved me anyways. It was my time to join Starclan. However, your mother has been watching over you this entire time, and she can attest that you have shown tremendous growth and maturity since you were first selected to journey into the Rogues' land. We are very proud of you and all that you have done for the clans."

Birdpaw's ears perked up at the mention of Willowleaf. "Mother? Is she here?"

Silverclaw shook his head. "No, I am the only one who has been sent to speak with you currently. However, do not worry, for she and I will walk with you in your dreams for many moons to come. We will always be watching over you from the stars, Birdpaw."

Birdpaw noticed that her father's ghostly figure was fading quickly. Sensing that her dream was ending, she blurted, "Wait! Father, what will happen to the clans now?"

"The future of the clans is bright, but there will still be many challenges to come," Silverclaw's meow was fading along with his spirit. "Brace yourself..."

And with those last few words, he was gone.

~*~

When Birdpaw first woke, she did not recognize her surroundings. However, memories of the final battle quickly resurfaced in her mind, and she gradually recalled all that had happened.

Silverclaw was gone. Blaze was gone.

But so were Greenfur and Clawface.

Birdpaw shuddered at the thought of how many other cats' lives were taken by this one conflict. After giving herself a light stretch, she rose to her paws and shook off the bits of moss that clung to her pelt. Careful not to disturb the other sleeping forms, Birdpaw tipoed her way to the den entrance.

Poking her head outside, she realized that night had already fallen. The clearing was deserted. It was eerily quiet, a stark contrast to the bloodshed that had occurred just a little while ago.

As her shoulder was still severely injured, Birdpaw found it difficult to walk without wincing with every pawstep she took. However, she was determined to get some fresh air; she needed time to think and reflect.

But the faint sound of pawsteps sounding behind her made Birdpaw freeze in her tracks. Her instinct caused her to tense up, bracing for an enemy, but the familiar scent of Shadeclan caused her to relax.

"Hey."

It was Falconclaw. The tabby warrior looked fine, save for a long

gash on his left hind leg and a smaller one on his cheek.

Birdpaw nodded in greeting.

"You could not fall asleep either?" he asked casually.

"Nope."

Falconclaw came and settled down beside Birdpaw. The two of them sat side-by-side in silence for a long while, each immersed in his/her own thoughts. Birdpaw did not feel disturbed or awkward though; for some reason, his presence comforted her.

Birdpaw broke the silence first. "Did I miss anything while I was unconscious?"

Falconclaw shook his head. "No, not much. After the Rogues realized that their leaders were dead, most of them fled. You saw that, I assume. Some Rogues willingly stayed behind, though, to join the clans."

Birdpaw was caught off guard by that last statement. "Really? How come?"

The tabby nodded. "Some were former clan cats anyways. Apparently, Greenfur managed to persuade them into leaving the clans. However, some of them regretted the decision once they realized that Greenfur did not actually care about their well-being. She only used them as tools to amass more power and authority. They missed their clanmates and family, so they sought forgiveness from the clans."

"And what did the leaders say?"

"The leaders welcomed them back. Of course, there will be some hostility still, but I am sure that it will be resolved as more time passes."

"But, why? Does this not mean that given another similar opportunity, these cats would still betray the clans?"

"Yes, but we have suffered devastating losses from this battle. The

clans need more members in order to survive this upcoming leaf-bare. I suppose that is also part of the leaders' reasoning when they decided to incorporate the Rogues back among us."

"I see."

They fell silent again. The moon, a thin sliver of gold, shone brightly against the indigo sky while the stars glittered from overhead. The wind howled in the distance, and Birdpaw's fur was ruffled from the chilly night air. Almost instinctively, she pressed closer to Falconclaw, and was secretly relieved when the dark tabby warrior curled his tail around her.

Together, they gazed up at the stars for a long, long while.

Birdpaw knew that the clans' struggles were far from over, but for now, all was well.

~~~~~~

Lol.

Intense.

Both in terms of reading and writing. I'm fairly sure this is the longest chapter in the story.

All right, just the Epilogue to go. I meant to publish this on Wednesday, but alas, writer's block got a hold of me. :(It is finally written, though! This was difficult >__< I hope it lived up to your expectations.

Okay I can't do this anymore. xD I'll come back to revise this after I publish the Epilogue.

Vote/Comment/Follow! (: As usual, thanks for reading and staying with me. <3

xxRain
~~~~~~

Epilogue

"Let all cats who are able to catch their own prey gather beneath the Fallen Log for a clan meeting!" Hailstar's meow rang out loud and clear across the clearing.

Immediately, the clan buzzed to life as its members rushed to settle down at the usual meeting spot next to the old, decayed tree trunk. In the days following the Rogue battle, everyone was busy establishing the old way of life again. The three clans split and returned to their old territories, and new clan members needed to be trained on clan ways.

Many Rogues ended up joining the clans. Most were already former clan members, but there were also loners and former kittypets who were interested in the idea of living in a community. They expressed frustration with Greenfur's way of ruling, and pledged their loyalty to the three leaders, if they would accept them.

Needless to say, every cat was extremely busy.

Birdpaw felt her heart start to race from excitement. Today was the day that she had been dreaming of ever since kithood. She gingerly waited at the edge of the Log for Hailstar to call her forward. Birdpaw snuck a peek down at the rest of the clan, and realized that all eyes were gathered upon her. As a result, the brown tabby she-cat quickly gave her pelt another grooming, not wanting even one hair to be out of place.

Eventually, the clan settled down and grew quiet. Sensing that every cat was ready, Hailstar cleared his throat and commanded, "Birdpaw, please come forward."

Birdpaw took a deep breath. She felt as if her heart was going to burst. From happiness, or nervousness, she could not tell. However, she snuck another sideways glance down at her clan, and was relieved to catch Falconclaw's eye. The dark brown tabby gave her

an encouraging nod, and Birdpaw instantly felt more at ease. Carefully placing one paw in front of the other, she made her way down the Log to meet Hailstar.

"Normally, apprentices must pass an assessment in order to become a full-fledged warrior. However, I have discussed things with Blacktail, and we have agreed that due to her role in aiding the clans in the previous battle with Greenfur, Clawface, and the Rogues, Birdpaw has proven herself more than worthy. If any cat objects, he or she may speak up now." Hailstar's tone was steady as he gazed down at his clanmates.

No cat spoke up.

"In that case, the warrior ceremony will begin," Hailstar declared. Turning to Birdpaw, he meowed, "I, Hailstar, leader of Shadeclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn. Birdpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Birdpaw responded. She had been ready to say these two words ever since she first set foot into Rogue territory, and the conviction in her voice seemed to please Hailstar.

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Birdpaw, from this moment you will be known as Birdflight. Starclan honors your loyalty and your courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Shadeclan."

Hailstar bent forward to rest his muzzle on Birdflight's head, and she licked his shoulder in return.

"Birdflight! Birdflight!" the clan began to chant.

As Birdflight leapt off the Log, she was greeted by her clanmates with licks and words of congratulations.

"Are you ready for your vigil?" Leafpaw and Graypaw bounced up to Birdflight, circling her excitedly. The two kits had grown over

the moons, and have become apprentices to Falconclaw and Violetfoot, respectively.

Birdflight purred and playfully swiped at her two kithood playmates. "Yes, I am ready," she replied.

Then, Birdflight was greeted by Blacktail and Mossfern. The tortoiseshell queen, revealed to be Blacktail's mate, had decided to return to Shadeclan. Blacktail seemed much less stern now, as he was reunited with his family. However, since the black warrior was recently appointed to deputy, he was always very busy and was not often seen with his kits. "Congratulations, Birdflight," her former mentor meowed. His tone was gruff, but Birdflight could see the pride and warmth in his amber eyes.

"Thank you, Blacktail. It was thanks to your training," Birdflight dipped her head respectfully to the black warrior, who let out a low purr.

"Best of luck to you, Birdflight," Mossfern licked Birdflight's ear affectionately, and Birdflight thanked her warmly as well.

"Congratulations, Birdflight! I'm so happy for you," Featherpelt purred while bumping Birdflight's shoulder playfully. The brown tabby she-cat aimed a cuff at her friend's ears in return.

After many more words of congratulations, Birdflight felt almost dazed when she was finally away from the crowd. Taking a deep breath, she felt as if she were almost floating from bliss. She was a warrior at last!

Birdflight took a moment to glance up at the sky. Part of her was wistful; she selfishly wished that her parents could be here to share in her joy. Birdflight sighed. Today was such a wonderful day; she should not ruin it for herself by drowning in her own self-pity.

"Missing them?" a voice in Birdflight's ear made her jump, before she realized it was Falconclaw.

Birdflight nodded. The tabby warrior was good at reading her mind, she realized.

"Mmm." Falconclaw did not say anything, only placed his tail-tip on Birdflight's shoulder in an attempt to comfort her.

"It's okay," Birdflight suddenly mewed.

When Falconclaw gave her a puzzled look, she turned to face him and explained, "I am not sad."

"Oh really?" The dark tabby seemed doubtful.

"Yes."

"How come?"

"Because..." Birdflight trailed off as she gazed up at the sky again. The stars could not be seen during this hour, but for some reason she could still feel Silverclaw and Willowleaf's presences, watching over her with pride and love.

"Because I know they are here with me, even if I cannot see them."

~~~~~~

Wow.

I dunno, I wasn't sure if I should end it here to be honest....but writing any more of a "conclusion" felt kind of redundant to me. :/ It's a lil late though (gotta get up at 4 AM tomorrow!!) so I'm kind of tired and maybe I'm just not thinking clearly. :(Who knows, maybe I'll end up changing this or adding to it or something. xD

Or maybe not.

._.

I'm pretty satisfied with it right now.

~~~~

So.....damn. Wow.

I can't believe that I actually finished this.

I honestly can't believe it.

When I first started A Twisted Fate (well it wasn't even called A Twisted Fate back then LOOL), I was in 8th grade. I was a warrior cats fanatic, and loved loved loved to write. I had the rough story all planned out -- I listed out the clan cat names, drew the territories, and even had the first few chapters typed up in Google Docs. It was only a bit later that my friend introduced me to Wattpad, and even later that I actually decided to switch over to writing here.

I remember that in the beginning, writing here was hard. It was incredibly hard to gain reads, let alone comments or votes. I felt very discouraged at first, and it wasn't until 2 years later that this story actually started to receive attention. >__<

Over the years, I've changed a lot, too. Perhaps if you go back and reread the entire story, you might be able to see the subtle changes in my writing style/quality as the chapters progress. At first, I didn't like that -- I thought it made my writing inconsistent. However, looking back...maybe it's actually a good thing. Because honestly, the essence of Birdpaw's character was based on myself. And...I guess, watching her grow also reflected my own personal growth over the past 5 years. (:

There's been many ups and downs, laughs and tears. And like Birdpaw, I'm about to close one chapter of my life and embark on another. It's actually unbelievable though -- just like how Birdpaw looked forward to becoming a warrior, I looked forward to moving away from home and finally stepping into adulthood.

But now that I'm actually here, I'm a little bit afraid. Afraid of the future, afraid of being separated from my old friends, afraid of having to step out of my comfort zone despite being a complete extrovert.

But.....either way, what's gonna come is gonna come, huh. And don't get me wrong, I'm still incredibly excited and blessed that I have the amazing opportunity to continue my studies

and meet so many talented, intelligent, and kind people. (: I look forward to what the next four years will bring, and I wish all of you the best of luck too, in whatever you do.

Thank you so much for all your love and support over the past 5 years. Without your encouraging comments, I most probably would have stopped writing. I'm not exaggerating one bit when I say that you are the sole reason I kept on pushing myself with this story.

You.

Made a difference. And thank you for that. Without you, ATF would not be here. :') Thank you for providing me with this precious opportunity to share my writing, my imagination...and a little bit of my heart/soul with you.

<3

And here, we part. Because life is full of farewells. xD #sadlyfe But I can't wait for what's in store for me, both as a college student and as a writer. And all I can hope is that you enjoyed reading my story, despite its flaws and typos and all of that.

Once again, thank you. Thank you for everything.

Much love,

FallenxxRain